Harlan Ellison on Colorization

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

APRIL

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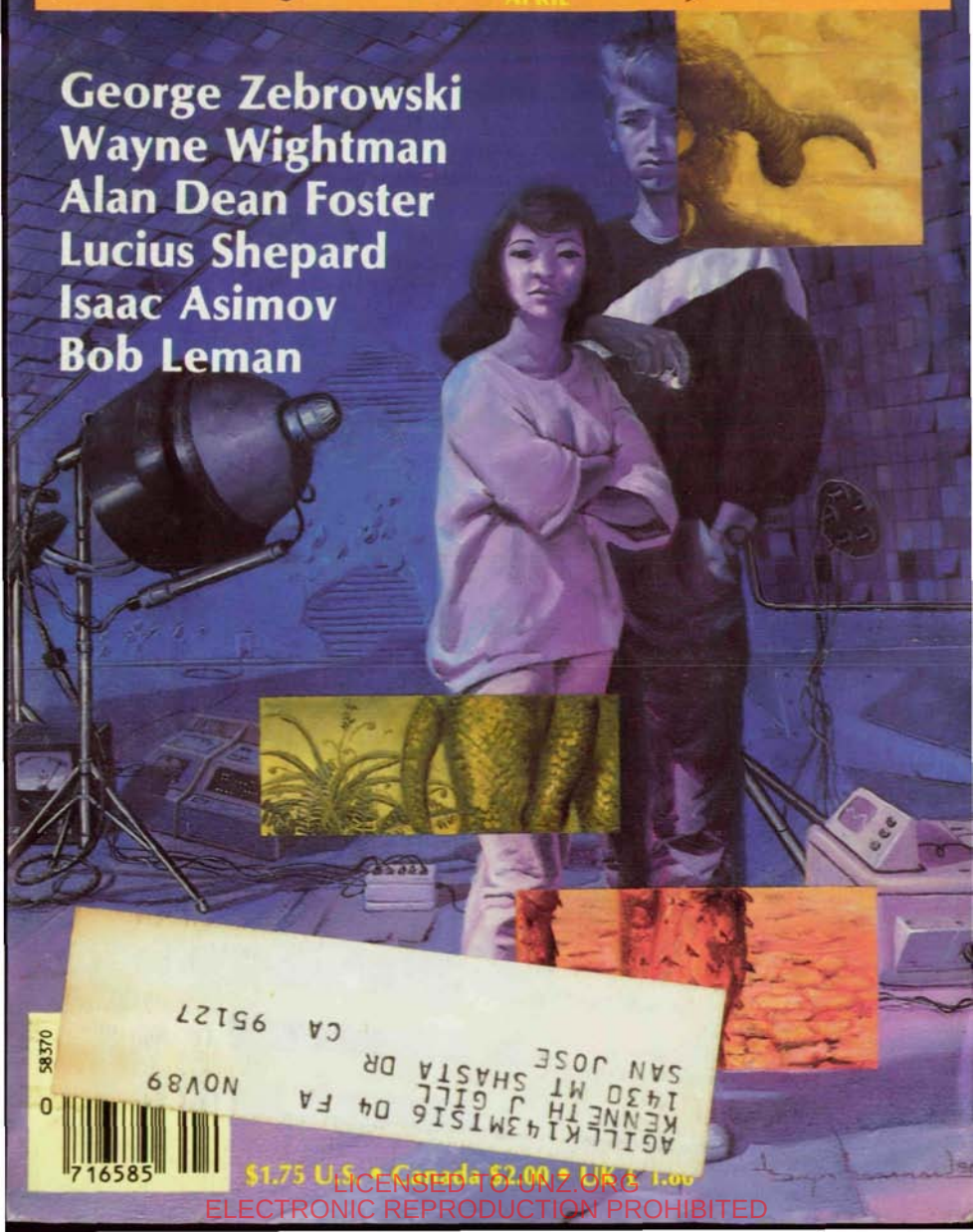

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Love is a delicate state that is easily shattered by stale custom and close examination. Then a magic is needed; a magic that can recreate, if only for a while, what once was thought destroyed.

The Glassblower's Dragon

BY
LUCIUS SHEPARD

On a Florida beach south of Fort Myers, in a tile-roofed bungalow set among sabal palms, there lived a glassblower named Carter McCrae, a lean, gray-haired man of fifty, whose tanned, seamed face displayed a cynicism born of two failed marriages and a number of lesser trials. In the workshop beside the bungalow, he produced pieces of marvelous delicacy that were sought after by museums throughout the world; yet he derived no spiritual satisfaction from his work, for he was of the belief that no human act — be it artistic or political or interpersonal — could be other than trivial, other than flawed. For the most part he lived alone, but from time to time women came to share the bungalow, some staying a night, some a week, some a month or two. The majority of these women were quite young, a circumstance perhaps attributable to the Electran obsession, and his current companion was a twenty-four-year-old named Sharon, a redhead with a pale complexion and a sensitive cast of feature that belied her callowness. For the past nine months, she had been traveling in Central America, an aimlessness she was utilizing — she said — to arrive at a career decision. Carter doubted such a decision would ever materialize; he foresaw that she would settle for a marriage of convenience and end up making some poor soul as miserable as his own wives had made him. Like his glassworks, she was a lovely, hollow surface.

Though her range of experience was less wide than Carter's, Sharon's disillusionment with life was equal to his and equally a product of indulgence (that is, if you subscribe to the belief that it is an indulgence to af-

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fect disillusionment from the vantage of a life of relative privilege); she was a true child of the eighties, seeing worth only in the material and espousing a trendy disaffection with spiritual values and unions based upon emotional attachment. Perhaps it was this similarity of outlook, this mating of ennui and cynicism, that had fired their mutual attaction. For a while they pretended to be in love, pretending that the age difference between them did not exist. They were both aware of each other's pretense; this awareness, in fact, led them to play games with one another, alternating counterfeits of passion with spells of indifference, and watching the results. But by the end of a month, Sharon had begun to show signs of restlessness, and, noticing these signs, Carter — who had fallen into the trap of trying to arouse her listless spirit, and therefore had succeeded in fostering a more paternal image than he would have liked — became withdrawn and silent, and spent more and more time each day in his workshop, erecting defenses against the impending breakup. He knew it would be difficult: even the pretense of love had required of him an emotional investment that had left him vulnerable to pain.

A month after Sharon had moved in, she waked with a severe fever: one of those curious maladies that doubtless are caused by a virus, but seem in their sudden onset and departure to have been seeded by a wind that blows through us for a day or so. Carter fixed her a pallet in the shade beneath the overhang of the bungalow roof, and brought her fruit juice and magazines. Then he sat beside her, entertained her with conversation, and made sketches of her mouth; she had a slight overbite that lent her face a sexy apprehensiveness, and he thought he would try and duplicate it on the face of a glass angel he intended to create. Watching his hand swoop across the paper, having at the moment an unqualified impression of him as a good, strong man, she said dazedly, wistfully, "I wish I loved you."

He stiffened. "That's a hell of a thing to say!" he snapped, and stalked off toward his workshop; but after a few paces, he turned and came back and sat beside her in the sand. He gave her a searching look. "Why can't you?" he asked. "Because of my age?"

Sharon usually avoided intimate confrontations at all cost, but the combination of her gratitude and her fever-provoked self-image of a helpless and possibly mordant waif had produced a thirst for honesty. "I guess so," she said. "When we're making love, I don't think about it at all. But then afterward, I . . . I just think how strange it is to have made love with someone so much older. Sometimes I say to myself, "When he's a hundred, you'll be seventy-six, and it sounds reasonable. Our staying together, I

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mean. But then I'll think, when he's sixty, I'll only be thirty-six; and that doesn't make as much sense." She swallowed back a dryness in her throat. "I'm sorry."

He studied the frail perfection of her features: lines bracketing her mouth as fine as scratches in soapstone; eyelids so thin they appeared in certain lights to be translucent, and cheekbones so sharp they seemed about to cut through her skin. He thought that if he could render that sort of precision in glass, he would deem worthwhile all his years of work.

"Why're you looking at me like that?" she asked, concerned that he might be preparing to tell her to leave: she did not feel well enough to walk into town.

"Just thinking how pretty you are."

She shot him an angry look. "I'm not!"

"Of course you are." He chuckled. "It's amazing how many beautiful women have poor opinions of themselves. It's as if they've decided that having good looks means they don't deserve anything else. Like you. You insist on denying your potential. . . ."

"I don't have potential. I'm just a piece of ass!"

He was startled by her vehemence. "That's not true."

She laughed. "Know how I entertained myself in New York? I'd get all punked out. Wear this silver lamé dress and corpse makeup and a belted ray gun. My hair in spikes. And I'd go to the dance clubs. All of 'em. Kamikaze, the Palladium. I called myself Future Girl. The doormen like it if you have a special persona; they're more liable to let you in. So I became Future Girl. I measured my life in headlines about her. Future Girl Gives Head in the Palladium Bathroom. Future Girl Toots Coke off a Toilet Seat While Getting Banged from the Rear by an Ad Exec. Future Girl Does a Train with Four Pale New Wave Creeps." She spat this out like a stream of bile, and was annoyed that he did not appear shocked.

"Why did you do it?"

"I loved it! It was *me*!"

"If that's so, why'd you quit?"

"I ran up against a headline I couldn't deal with."

She gazed out at the Gulf, its untroubled waters a steely blue except near the horizon, where lay a lacquered crimson reflection of the setting sun. Sandpipers scooted along the brown muck of the tidal margin. He waited for her to explain, and when she remained silent, he asked how the headline had read.

"Future Girl Gets Raped." She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. "You're the first man I've made it with since it happened. But all that means is, I'm ready to be Future Girl again."

"It doesn't have to mean that."

"I don't understand," she said.

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"How can you deny what I'm saying about myself? You don't have any better opinion of yourself than I do."

"Yeah," he said after a pause. "You're right. I've done degrading things . . . though that's not what afflicts me. I've put them into perspective. My difficulty lies in what I'm afraid of becoming."

"And what's that?"

"When I was in my twenties, I did some wandering around myself. Europe, South America. And at one point I ended up in this little town in southern Mexico. San Cristóbal de las Cases. I stayed with this old man who made a habit of taking in strays. He'd been a writer, had a couple of terrible marriages, and had more or less given up on life. Every night a bunch of us would sit around his hearth and talk. And sooner or later, John — that was his name — would tell us his vision of the future. He'd gone to Jesus, and had these vivid dreams about the Apocalypse. Armies of men glowing with radioactivity fighting on dry seabeds. Things like that. He was a romantic figure. We wrote about him in our journals. That's what he was to us — a journal entry." In his mind's eye, he saw John's embittered face, and, too, he seemed to hear his doomful tones.

"You don't have visions."

"No, but I've imitated his life in every other way. And I'm younger than he was. Give me another few years, and I'll work up some kind of fantasy."

"I wish . . . I wish I could help."

"You have. Beauty always helps."

Sharon couldn't think of a response. Finally she said, "Do you want to make love?"

"Not really. You're leaving soon. We both know that."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Irritated, he got to his feet. "I don't need a pity fuck. Another one of you will come along on the next bus." He put his hand to his eyes. "I'm sorry. Look, we had some good times. Let's just let it be, all right?"

"All right . . . if that's what you want."

"I'm going to do some work. If you'd like, I'll make you a going-away gift. Any requests?"

A rush of fever swept over her, and it seemed to bear an answer up from her depths. "Make me a dragon."

"Why a dragon?"

"I don't know. . . . Maybe because they don't exist."

Carter's level of inspiration was not up to such a complicated piece as a dragon. He decided to do her something abstract. Call it "Dragon." But after he had affixed the parison — a thick-walled bubble of molten glass —to the end of the pipe, his level of inspiration declined further. He stepped out of the workshop, intending to drop the parison into the sand. The sun was almost down, a sliver of fire on the horizon, and in its last

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glow, Sharon's hair was flame-colored; her skin was ivory reddened by firelight. Seeing her, Carter was overcome by sadness and longing, and imagining for a moment that like a musician he could produce a melody perfectly expressive of his feelings, he lifted the pipe, closed his eyes, and blew into it.

From Sharon's vantage the expanding parison was upheld against the dying sun and looked to be filled with red fire. Looked to be a winged shape writhing, attempting to break free of the glass stem from which it developed. She blinked, thinking she must be suffering a hallucination born of the fever, because she knew such complex pieces could not be made with a simple breath. But the shape did not vanish; rather, grew more and more intricate, extruding a long serpentine neck and tail, then a narrow reptilian head. The figure was not much larger than a cat, difficult to see due to its translucency, but she had no doubt of its nature: it was a dragon.

Even though Carter's eyes remained closed, he knew something extraordinary was happening. The breath that flowed out of him seemed endless, and it also seemed that he could feel the configuration of the shape it was producing in his throat. And when at last he did open his eyes, he was only mildly surprised to see the dragon give a sinuous twist that snapped its glass tether, and go whirling up above his head, its graceful wings rippling, fighting for altitude. Its balled eyes winked like baleful gems; its sleek belly appeared to enclose a boil of fiery gas, and every scale to hold a charge of crimson energy.

The dragon began to fly in circles about Sharon and Carter, circles that grew smaller and smaller, and they felt drawn toward each other by those dwindling orbits, like bits of flotsam being pulled into the core of a whirlpool. Finally they stood side by side, staring up at the dragon, which then flew a complicated series of loops above their heads reminiscent of the eloquent passes a magician might make with his hand above a smoking pentagram. For a second it hovered barely more than an arm's length away; it seemed to be regarding them with a contemplative eye, as if judging the merits of its work. Sharon had never seen anything so beautiful. The dragon was perfectly detailed, its glass talons tipped with the blood of the sunset, its fangs sparkling, and its clever features embodying a fierce smile that expressed an unmistakable satisfaction. She turned to Carter and perceived in his face a bedrock masculine principle whose existence she would have ridiculed a moment before; she realized that he had created this magical creature for her from a depth of emotion that she had never suspected could be directed toward her, and overwhelmed by this realiza-

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tion, she returned that emotion in full measure. As for Carter, he understood that Sharon had provided him the basic materials from which to create the dragon, that some quality in her had kindled inside him a spark of true feeling that his breath had fanned into life, that she had shaped with her wish, with the magical will that women invoke when they know love is wholly given.

The dragon let out a tiny hiss, wheeled up higher than palms, its glass surfaces reflecting myriad prisms. Then it arrowed straight toward the setting sun, of which a mere sliver still showed in the west. Within seconds it was lost to sight, vanishing just as the sun vanished below the horizon, signaling day's end with a pale green flash that pierced upward through low-lying clouds and held steady for the space of a breath, only to fade with the stubbornness of a powerful dream. And as if that flash were the pure form of knowledge that derives from such dreams, Sharon and Carter became aware that this magic born of the struggle between their tarnished sensibilities and their unstained hopes was not something that would last. Soon they would have to confront a world devoid of magic; soon they would have to speak, to break the spell of heated silence woven by the dragon's circling flight; and then they would win at love, or they would lose. And loss was probable, for love is an illusion with the fragilty of glass and light, whose magic must constantly be renewed. But for the moment they did not allow themselves to think of these things. They were content to stare after the dragon, after the sole truth in their lives that no lie could disparage.

The moon rose, applying a sheen of silver to the dark, placid waters of the Gulf; out to sea, pale clouds like ghostly thoughts cruised across the first stars. Sharon and Carter turned to one another, and though they were afraid of all that would come, the night began without error.

The F&SF Competition will appear in the May issue.

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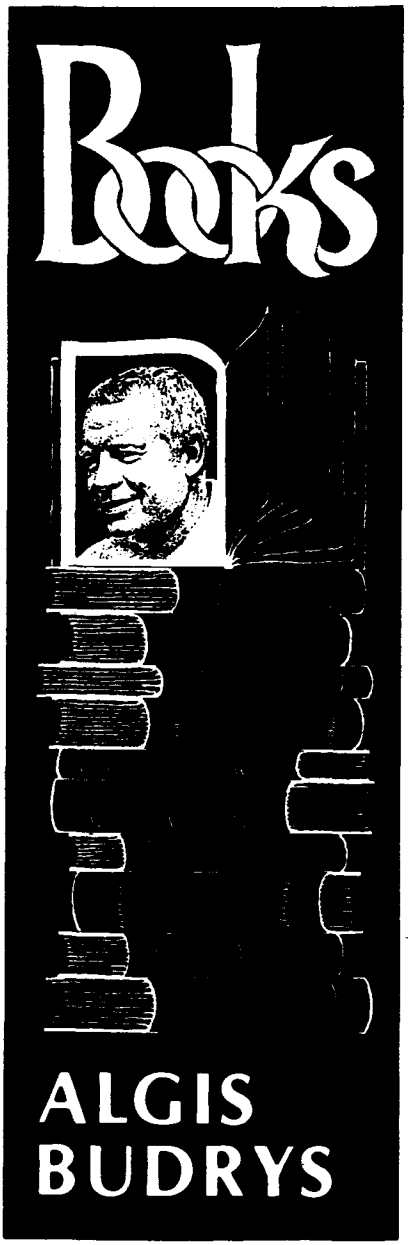

Vergil in Averno, Avram Davidson. Doubleday, $12.95

The Hercules Text, Jack McDevitt. Ace Special, $3.95

The idea that speculative fiction is a genre has hard sledging against the fact that its polar counterpart, descriptive or "Mainstream" fiction, is younger and contains many sub-categories itself. In fact, if we look at the history of the literary art, which began with attempts to dramatize the ways of the supernatural toward mankind, then descriptive fiction is an offshoot of speculative fiction — ie., a genre.*

But we don't have to work all that out today. What we can do is look at two books, both undeniably SF. We

**And perhaps a compulsive denial of the supernatural, so staunch as to be an affirmation of its power; a testament to the terror loaded into any overt thought that apparent reality may be transient, and that correct rules of behavior may have become ineffectual at any moment. That is, descriptive fiction may largely be an insane art, serving to lend a meretricious permanence to a self-circumscribed universe with perpetually tottering walls. Whereas SF comes to grips with the mystery, and is by that token more rational and more affirmative. Perhaps this construct explains the reason for the often hysterical opposition to SF by some parents and by a literary "Establishment" which seems to be increasingly bizarre in its endorsements of what is properly literature, and increasingly frayed in its intellectual raiment.*

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can marvel at the separations between them, in style, technique, apparent objective, and expressions of creativity. How can any art with such distances within it be a "genre"?

Read in Latin, *Vergil in Averno* means one thing; read in English, it means something different. Either way, it's the title of a long-awaited sequel to *The Phoenix and The Mirror*, an almost legendary and relatively early novel by Avram Davidson, now in the fullness of his years.

An interesting aspect of this event is that Doubleday remaindered *Phoenix* almost immediately after publication. Nothing personal — Doubleday had a policy of remaindering new category-fiction titles as soon as the first wave of store and library orders had been filled. This was its idea of astute product-oriented business practice. Davidson, impoverished throughout his long career, and convinced of his work's worth over a span even longer, felt compelled to buy up those copies and keep the book alive by trickling them out to the SF public at retail. Thanks to this long diligence on the part of the author it shafted, Doubleday is now able to assert merit in its publishing *Vergil in Averno.**

**True to Doubleday form, its PR copy refers to a "sorcerer-poet Vergil Marcus" as the book's leading character. I am delighted that Doubleday has been sold; perhaps naively, I feel that any management could hardly be worse than the old one from top to bottom.*

The only in-house individual there who looks good in this whole matter is *Averno*'s editor Pat LoBrutto who, uncharacteristically, is willing to take a chance now and then. May he survive. Now — what he has taken a chance on is a novel that would be even surer than *Phoenix* to baffle any corporate comptroller. For that matter, it's couched in a narrative that may well baffle even dedicated SF consumers.

Davidson has never been a man not to mince words. Of all the writers who have nevertheless not disdained publication in the core SF media, and furthermore actually been able to sustain a career at that core — however parlous the pay — Davidson would be the last to tell you a plain tale plainly.

The joy, the almost unique joy of reading Avram Davidson's work, is that it evidences his infectuous delight in making the language dance. He has other fine qualities as a writer, and we'll touch on them, but in this one he is without peer among us. Perhaps among anyone. He can start a sentence in the middle, work out towards both ends simultaneously and make you wonder that everyone doesn't. Wonder briefly. The ability to do that is sprung from a rare grasp of what a sentence *is*, and what work is done by sentences in the service of sense. Therefore, the deployment of words is not, to Davidson, a utilitarian skill, or a love of words as isolated things, or a process of linear con-

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struction as taught in academies of journalism. The words in a Davidson sentence are chosen flowers in a garland, so twined that one can scarcely tell where the stem of one leaves off gripping another, so that one may have passed the end several times before realizing one has begun again. And the various garlands themselves so twined that the structure they limn in their burgeoning multiplicity is not so much erected as defined.

Theodore Sturgeon knew in his bones that changing a word or two in a manuscript might require rewriting the entire book. R. A. Lafferty caracoles through the language of his narratives like Bacchus among the wineleaves. Gene Wolfe can tell you something while ostensibly telling another. And the work of all three of them reflects a positive joy in exploring every nook of our vocabulary. But Davidson — Davidson has always gone to his manuscript as a bridegroom to his beloved, he bright of face and she angelically fortunate in her nuptial.

Within that . . . ah, within that, the plain tale. Not plainly told, oh, no, but what could be plainer than what people do?

Vergil, not yet a Mage at least in his own estimation, is hired by the magnates of the city of Averno to do them a service. The industries of foul-smelling Averno depend on the presence of cheap heat from fumaroles and other volcanic phenomena, which enable their mediocre dyed goods and ironware to undercut the prices of better products from other corners of the Roman Empire. The heat from any given subterranean outlet waxes and wanes. Sometimes it extinguishes itself altogether, and a smithy or the steeping vats must be moved to some fresh orifice. This is an inconvenience, they explain to Vergil, doling out a coin or two, expressing respect for his learning but not letting him stay in their villas overlong. Solve this problem, Mage, they tell him, and we will reward you handsomely.

Vergil is yet young, though educated. There are things he longs for — rare tomes, rare instruments well beyond his means, with which to fathom things better. Averno stinks, but the prospect is heady. With some employment of his arts, but mostly in conscientious labor guided by common sense and commonplace engineering principles, he sets about doing what he thinks has been asked. Having at last accomplished the whole job, having rounded it off sensibly with an elegant plan for conveying heat to any desired location without respect to mephitic caprices of Nature, requiring only that the magnates make long-term investments and undertake a new technology, he gets kicked in the arse by Life, perhaps to the improvement of his sophistication.

Note, please, that it's characteristic of Davidson to have given us a simple, rueful, point to his homily. It's

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one squirmingly familiar to any of us who thought mere brains and talent weren't quite enough but honest work added to them surely would be. In perceiving that, we felt, we were one up on the average. All of Davidson's work with the manuscript is ultimately intended to permit him to dance up on us with a story — a dramatic observation — on something we have previously found ways to soothe. It's not important, we say to ourselves; well, of *course* it's true, but we have gone on to broader viewpoints, we have grown. "Hurt's, doesn't it?" Davidson remarks. "Still hurts, for all of that." And if we are any good at all, we are struck.

If we are any good at all. Another thing about Davidson is his capacity to find where that child in us had taken refuge. Davidson as an individual has always been remarkable for the respectful manner of his address to children. He has known for a long time that grown people are not, well, exactly *hostile* to what an organism was before its exoskeleton hardened; merely oblivious much of the time, and notably amnesiac regarding exact details of our own circumstances in those few beginning years when we freely wore our hearts on our sleeves, and thought that our delight excused this behavior. Davidson has known for a long time what it is to have an intellect whose expression is closely monitored by loving courts of no appeal. In that is his true art which makes us wince; the manuscript is his artful eccentric guise. So he makes many of us good, if only briefly, who thought we were past all that. And he does not give a damn for our hard-won practicalities. Commonly we call such a man a fool.

Well, apart from the fact that I defy any *first*-rate appraisor of the prose arts to consign Davidson's SF to some mere cul-de-sac, what of this specific example?

You may agree with me on reading it that what we see here is a craftsmanly attempt to make real use of an ascribed weakness. Said weakness being a (supposed?) widely held notion that Davidson's prose style is too opaque for comfort. Very well, then, Davidson seems to have said in preparation for sequelizing his *magnus opus*, very well, then, I'll show 'em what opaque is. First I'll show what I *really* could have been doing to twist the words all along. Then, I'll tell 'em the whole story while showing them just some cryptically disconnected incidents. Then I'll have Vergil misunderstand what he's seeing and hearing. In some cases, I'll have him deny it. And in other cases, I'll show him in scenes that didn't actually take place, but which change him vitally nonetheless.

And I shall be Cadmus, sowing the dragon's teeth. What are you doing? they will ask. Your furrows veer, your plot of ground is not square, your horse pulls here, pushes there, and in

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general you seem to have forgotten much about farming, if in fact you ever learned.

'Oh, yes,' I will say and wait.

My heart goes out to you, Cadmus.

Then there's the science-procedural novel. This art requires journalistic research of its author. The ultimate strength of this venerable and recently resurgent SF form lies in its accurate conceptualizing of how things can be described in the physical universe, in the judicious use of terminology while setting forth a suppositional physical situation, and ultimately in its ability to show what changes will be imposed on human culture if this happens. In its best contemporary examples — by Ben Bova, or Gregory Benford or Larry Niven and/or Jerry Pournelle, or by Paul Preuss — it believeably shows you who will be hurt and who will be satisfied. To work well in the usual case, it needs the clarities available in a journalistic prose style, full of quotes not so much as dialogue, and of anecdote not so much as scene. Though Preuss's main strength (he has many) is the ability of his words to depict graphically stefnal landscapes as few others can without brushes and an easel, and Benford's prose consciously works toward being a successful exception, that's the rule.

Into this tradition, with its fresh impetus, steps Jack McDevitt, with his first novel, *The Hercules Text*. It has the approval, in cover blurbs, of Benford and Preuss, and quite so; it's an effective piece of work. Whereas I studied *Vergil*, appreciatively and I hope cunningly, my pleasure in the McDevitt was of an entirely different order. In a life whose events have lately been coming very close together, I had to put it down on several occasions. But I regarded those occasions as interruptions, not rests, and at odd moments elsewhere I'd look forward with suspense to getting back to it.* Not, mind you, that I found it technically perfect or considered that McDevitt has learned all one needs to know about what to put in and what to leave out, in narrative and in characterization. But nevertheless I wasn't content until I found out what happened next, and in this tradition that's the trump card.

An Ace Special, in fact.** That puts McDevitt and his book in the company of Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard and William Gibson, among others of the stellar band of first-novelists fostered by Terry Carr for this deservedly prominent series. Carr in his introduction says something about McDevitt's occasional lack of

**I did find the resource to take in Isaac Asimov's useful disquisition on anti-particles, in these pages at the time.*

***I did not set up this pun. I discovered it at just about the time you did, and am a little take aback at where my mind goes sometimes. Hoping you are the same. . . .*

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polish; he is right to dismiss it as largely irrelevant.

Carr also notes the book's thematic resemblance to Carl Sagan's *Contact*, and explains McDevitt's manuscript was completed before Sagan was published. Again, I think the resemblance is irrelevant, although I don't know the full extent of that. Sagan's publisher apparently saw fit not to send review copies to genre columnists, and I have a rule in such cases. I am reading *Contact*, but in widely separated chunks in other people's waiting rooms and am only up to Page 158. In any event, we are talking here about the first novel of someone who seemingly plans a career among us *polloi*. Let us look at it.

Unlike *Vergil*, which is always about what is happening to Vergil, and us, *Text* is always about what will happen to us, and several other characters, should our little globe intercept the full freight of a highly advanced civilization's intellectual gleanings. Originating from Althea, an anomalous solar system in the constellation Hercules and more than one-and-a-half million light-years distant, the initial signal was apparently made by manipulating a pulsar. It may, according to one of the hypotheses reached by a member of the observing group on Earth, be an artificial pulsar. As things progress, there is increasing evidence that the entire Althean solar system is artificial . . . a sort of multi-modular vast spaceship roaming the Universe in search of that unlikely thing, intelligent life.

On the Earth of which we speak, the date is some decades advanced beyond ours. This is enough to give McDevitt's scientist-characters some advanced electronic equipment with which to probe outward. Those probes can produce images of a large number of planetary systems around an equally significant sampling of stars. What they've shown thus far is that the typical planetary system cannot possibly support recognizable life; that Earth with its companion Solar planets is not alone after all, but that mankind almost surely is. The Altheans have apparently found the same thing. Our advantage over them now is that we have evidence — a million and a half years old — that in a sense we are not alone. The Altheans, firing their immense signal out into the black at light-speed, could only hope.

I think about that hope; the immense devotion to an ideal that would drive a species to such extremes in an effort to express its existence, without rational expectation of an acknowledgment. And in the back of my mind, a voice whispers Yes, but you thrill to that hope, and it was not an Althean but a human who aroused it; you are human, therefore it is your hope.

That's one of the fundamental expressions to which SF resonates; an emotional intellection beyond the

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reach of descriptive fiction, qualitatively beyond commonplace optimism however exaggerated, because to put it into a descriptive fiction manuscript instantly transforms that story into SF. McDevitt demonstrates that; slightly advanced hardware aside, the world of his tale is negligibly different from what we can see out our windows. Furthermore, for the Althean text one could readily substitute any one of the conventional thriller menaces; Fu Manchu's new death ray, SPECTRE's nuclear device placed so as to trigger World War III, or any Terrestrial scientist's discovery of some principle or technique whose potential could be contended-over by exactly the same cast acting exactly the same scenes and uttering only circumstantially re-written dialogue. The result would clearly be just another competent genre thriller.

Like Sagan, McDevitt has taken the occasion of his postulate to deal with the question of whether other intelligences have formed a concept of God, or, as the Altheans handle it, a Designer for the Universe.*

The full Althean transmission is omnijaculative; everything they know is apparently in there and moving outward at 186,000 mps. Language specialists make increasingly sophisticated translations, and find that much of it can be written as poetry . . . a poetry of stunning desolation and ineffectuality, with cryptic references to contact with the dead. The physical scientists, meanwhile, have been able to read the math sooner. One of them dies at the hands of Maxwell's Demon. Another discovers a method for making black holes and attempts to destroy the entire Althean text. A third tells the U.S. President about a way to tap the Earth's magnetic field for limitless energy and thus make particle-beam weapons almost immediately deployable . . . while a fourth finds the key to DNA manipulations that will cure all physical disabilities and confer immortality.

The cast to whom all this occurs is what you would expect; scientists of various stripes of humanity, an attractive female psychologist, an agnostic Catholic priest-scientist, a politically sensitive president, a Soviet ambassador ponderous of speech, the FBI, the CIA, the specter of National Security versus the precept of academic freedom, the boss bureaucrat, the television evangelist, the wife bent on divorce, the diabetic child, and, in the foreground . . . if there is anyone in the foreground at all . . . a minor bureaucrat with good intentions and cautious impulses who in a thriller would be the Everyman with

*_I feel I should register it with you now that for the past thirteen years, I've been working — with a total of, I guess, six months' accumulated time in forward gear — on a novel of which this same thing is a (differently-approached) feature. . Many of us stefnists come to this pass sooner or later._

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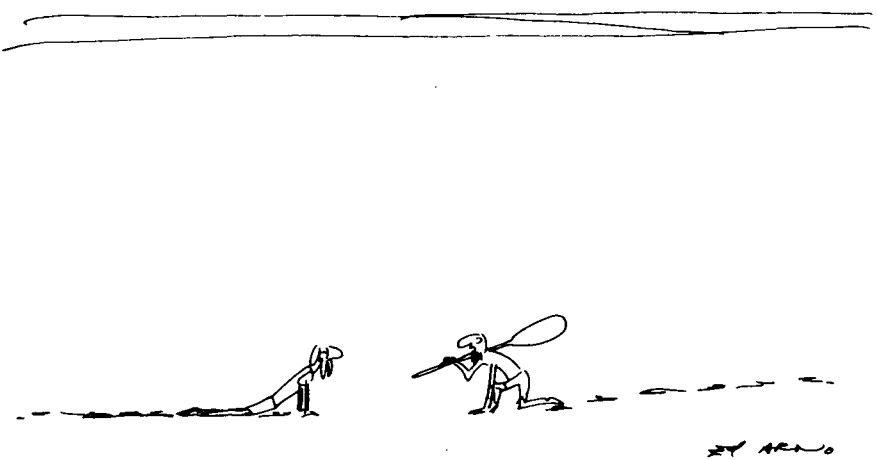
whom one would identify supposing none of the other characters fit.

There is more to him in McDevitt, as there is to all the other main characters. They suffer from, I infer, McDevitt's touch of uncertainty in characterization. But the attempt to make them coherent as people is clearly there, as is the nearly successful attempt to have the events follow a logical sequence in which they could realistically participate.

McDevitt's relevant service as an SF writer is that, having set up a speculative physical situation, he has conscientiously given it a verisimilitudinous development leading to an interesting suppositional cosmology. He furthermore finds something new to say about telepathy. That something is a notable advance on this standard SF construct, and even reconciles it with another one that was hitherto independent. You'll recognize this bridge when you come to it; it then leads to a pragmatic "reincarnation" theory, furthermore, and with that accomplishment McDevitt steps forward and presents fully valid credentials as an artist in this . . . anti-genre(?).



"That's a good question."

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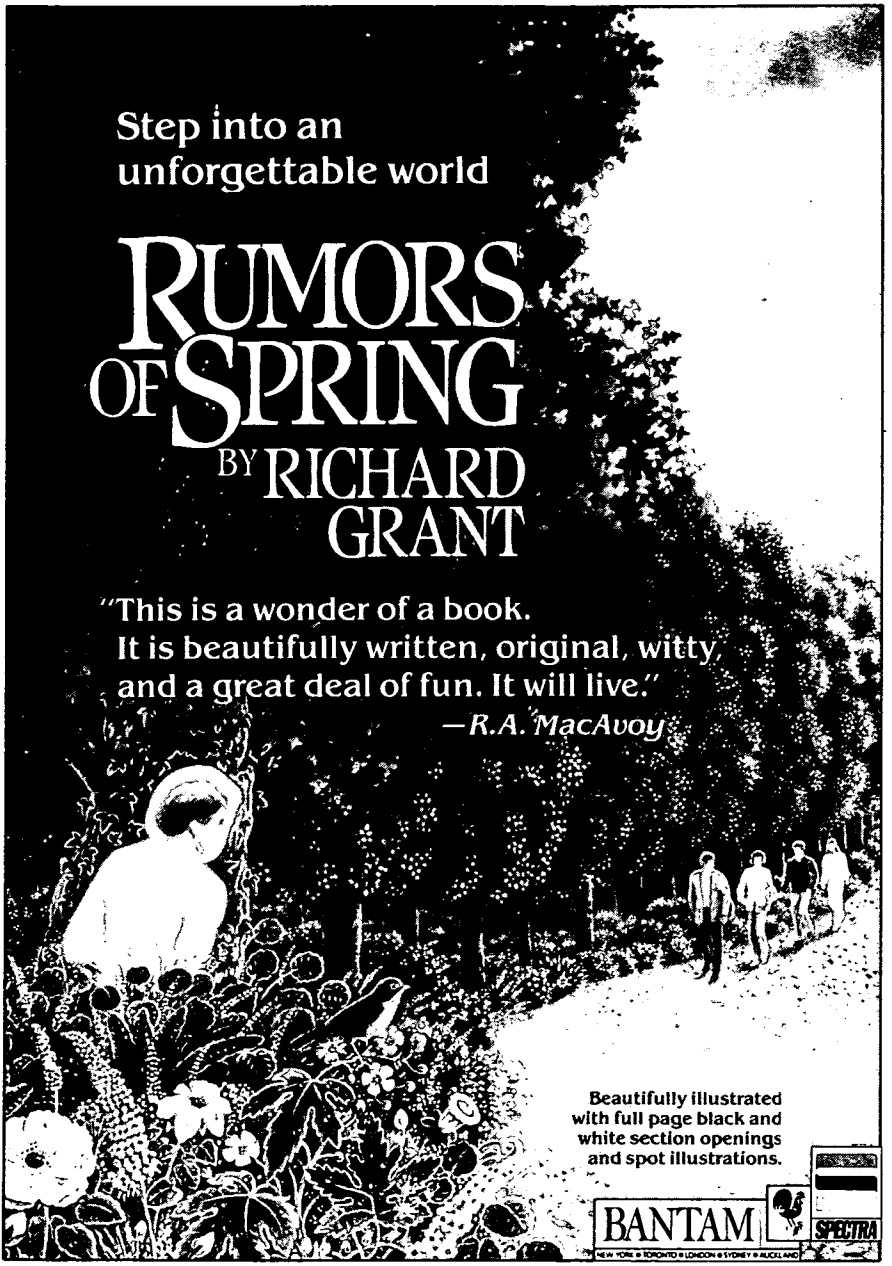

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Wayne Wightman ("The Metaphysical Gun," February 1986) returns with a fast and funny story about a high school science project that begins in a haunted house and ends up in some very odd places indeed . . .

Cage 37

BY

WAYNE WIGHTMAN

I tried to ignore the screaming while Ray, the class skinhead, sliced open another rat and snipped out its cherry-sized heart before it stopped beating. This was his end-of-the-year science project to demonstrate how the Aztecs did surgery, and Mr. Boren Zick, our fundamentalist sub-head teacher, stood beside him and nodded his approval. Zick was about thirty-five, but he looked like a worn-out fifty — mealy-skinned, soft-bodied, and he smelled like a Salvation Army store.

"Quickly, Ray, quickly now. Hmm," as he studied Ray's mutilation and pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up his oily nose. Zick wore string ties and white shirts and usually had a fat red pimple somewhere on his face. Today it was on the side of his nose, and his glasses were always sliding over it. I imagined swarms of meat-eating bacteria churning around inside his pustule, eating him alive. Today he also had rat-blood splatters across his pen-filled pocket protector and the right side of his shirt.

Skinhead Ray held up the rat's heart, and all over the room, girls were shrieking and grabbing at their faces. All except for Andrea, Ray's frilly girlfriend — she sat next to me and leaned over and displayed her six amazing inches of tight-boobed cleavage and the tops of her tan nipples. Tits and blood and screaming. It was a complicated scene. I had heard that being a teenager was difficult, but it didn't seem to me that adults ever talked about going through stuff like this.

"There it is," Ray said, holding the little heart up in front of his face. Ray was a sect leader of the Rude Shitz, so he was probably used to doing this

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kind of thing. Rat blood streamed down through his fingerless gloves and under his inch-thick wristwatch/cassette-player bracelet. "I think it's still beating." He frowned and focused his narrow eyes on it. "Well. . . ." He shook it twice. "It *was* beating. It quit," he said accusatorily and threw it hard into the porcelain sink, where it hit with a wet thunk.

"Must have been a bunch of sick rats," Zick said, snuffling and pushing his glasses up his nose and over his pimple. He grimaced a little.

"Can I have another one, please?" Ray asked. He looked at me and grinned. "Maybe if I *dinked* it around a little, I could get a new *slant* on it."

"I don't know," Zick said thoughtfully, scratching the oily cleft in his chin and then straightening the two strings of his tie. Blood smeared from the pen protector across to his buttons. "We have only two rats left."

"Maybe I could use a different *slope* with the razor blade," he said, looking at me.

Andrea was still leaning over, fiddling around with the pink shoe box she had under her desk and threatening to spill her boobs in my direction. Ray didn't notice — and he had become well known over the years for bopping anyone who even thought nude thoughts about his girlfriends. And Andrea inspired nude thoughts. Andrea inspired problems standing up at the end of class. I had known her and Ray since fifth grade, and they had always been the same — except Ray's fists and Andrea's boobs were all bigger now.

"I think this is cruel," a girl whined from one of the front rows. "Ray's already got to kill three today, and I need one for my project."

"This is *science,"* Zick said stiffly, pushing up his wire-rimmed glasses and smearing rat blood on the side of his nose. "We were made the lords of our world. We can do anything we want with nature. Eighth Psalm. 'Thou makest man master over all thy creatures; thou hast put everything under his feet . . . all the wild beasts, the birds in the air and the fish in the sea.' Read it and weep, my tenderhearted friends."

"Could I please use another rat?" Ray said politely.

"Certainly," Zick said. Then he glanced at his wristwatch and shook his head. "Well, I don't know if we have time to kill another one today, Ray. And we need to save one for Cindy."

"I bet I could do better on a cat," Ray said. "I need something bigger. Maybe it wouldn't get so *gooked* up when I slice it open." He glanced at me again while Andrea swung her chest and made a soft kissing noise at me.

"A cat, hm?" Zick turned to the class and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Anyone have a cat they want to donate?"

"I bet Dell does," Ray said. "He's

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got a whole houseful of the things."

Zick looked at me. "Dell, do you have a cat you don't need?"

"No," I said, "I don't." I knew I was going to get in trouble, and I wanted to go to college in the fall with a nice-looking transcript, but the idea of Ray killing more animals was something I figured even a teenager shouldn't have to put up with. "I don't have any cats I don't need," I said, "and if Ray kills another animal, I'm going to report what's been going on in this class to the SPCA." My throat tightened up, and I barely squeaked out the last word.

Ray feigned shock, and Mr. Zick smiled. "Ah," he said. "So we have here an animal rights fanatic. I see. A defender of dumb animals. Do you think animals have souls, Dell? Don't you believe what it says in Psalms? Are you an atheist?"

Behind his back, Ray made his eyebrows dance as he jammed an index finger in and out of his other fist.

"Do you think the lives of dumb animals are more important than human knowledge, Dell? Do you think pussycats have human emotions, Mr. Honor List Student?"

"I don't think animals should be killed for fun."

Andrea whispered to me, "You can kill mine for fun anytime." She had her big purse and her pink shoe box up on her desk now.

"If I promise not to enjoy it," Ray said, "can I open up a couple of cats tomorrow, Mr. Zick? If the Aztecs did it, I know I can." Zick wasn't looking at him, and, like a lizard, Ray flicked out his tongue a couple of times and grinned.

Andrea whispered, "You can open mine up anytime, Dell."

Zick ignored Ray and focused on me. "It is in the nature of animals to kill each other. Our Lord gave us the same right. The greater eat the lesser, and in the world, we are the greater."

"*I* ain't going to eat these rats!" Ray yukked.

The class laughed with him, but Zick kept staring at me. "You objected to my presentation on the creation of the universe, Mr. Honor Student, and you insisted on believing in evolution, despite the overwhelming evidence I presented to the contrary. I think we have a failure in communication here."

"I just did book reports on some books I'd read, sir." Calling him "sir" made me want to gag, but if I got anything less than a "C" in the class, I'd have to retake it in college.

Zick pushed his glasses up on his oily nose and grimaced as they bumped over his pimple. I felt a little weird being on the side of the bacteria, but today it seemed natural. He planted his hands on the worktable and leaned forward. Light gleamed on his slick face, and the mutilated body lay soaked in blood in front of his belt buckle. "You wrote those things to antagonize me, didn't you? You read

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those books just because they contradicted me."

"Maybe he just wanted to get another *slant* on it," Ray said.

"You could get me slanted anytime," Andrea whispered. "Or standing up, if you want."

I was having a tough time concentrating on anything, and I had the feeling that Zick was about to unload on me. I felt like an adult who needed a drink.

"Class," he said, "you all have the final projects schedule I gave you last week, and Dell is scheduled for a week from Friday — is that not so, Dell?"

I nodded. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Andrea had propped up her purse on her shoe box so Ray and Zick couldn't see, and had then slipped one of her hands under the breast nearest me. She was fondling herself. Why was she doing this to me? Ray would kill me if he saw her.

"You could do this," she breathed.

"Well, class," Zick said, "the schedule has been changed. Dell, you're on *this* Friday." He smiled. "Forty-eight hours. Tell me, have you decided what you're going to do yet? I think you were a little unsure the last time I asked you."

"Actually, sir, I was still planning to do what I told you before."

He smiled. "Remind me."

"Well, sir, ever since I was in grammar school, I've heard this rumor about a house on Oak Street that's haunted. I thought I'd set up some equipment and do some observation and interview some people."

"A haunted house," Zick said, and nodded deeply. Disks of reflected light moved up and down his nose.

Behind him, Ray was making more finger-in-the-fist gestures at me.

"It fits," Zick said. "It all fits. You think animals have souls, you're an evolutionist, and now you're into Satanism. It all fits. I'm not really surprised." He gazed out the window toward the evergreens that lined the edge of the tennis courts. "A lot of you so-called *smart* people," he said philosophically, "idolize your intelligence. This leads you into paths of lies and untruths and those things that have no validity."

"I'm not a Satanist, sir." I could still peripherally see Andrea pinching the end of her boob, but I was loosing interest. Zick was getting serious with me. He'd never climbed on me before with such delight, and I could end up taking extra units in college.

He pushed up his glasses again and tilted his head back and looked down his nose at me. "Hm," he grunted.

"You're —," I said and then shut my mouth. I tried to be sensible: the semester was only two weeks from ending, and with a few decent grades, I could get into college without having to take a lot of low-level courses, and Zick was a sub-head, which was a lot more of a problem for him than it

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was for me. So, I thought, I should pay more attention to Andrea's tender teenage tits than to Zick's paranoid accusations and just hope the bacteria won.

"I'm *what?*" Zick asked.

"Nothing, sir. I apol —"

"I'm a *nothing?* Is that what you think of me, Mr. Honor Student? Your teacher is a *nothing?*"

"No, sir," I said, figuring I could eat a little shit to avoid an extra couple hundred hours of college work. I just wanted to get through and be left alone. "I was going to say that you're assuming I'm a Satanist just because I'm curious about a haunted house. I'm not a Satanist."

Ray was standing up there grinning and smearing blood from his mesh gloves onto his cheeks, and Zick was patiently shaking his head side to side like he was feeling sorry for me, and I heard myself saying, "You think *I'm* a Satanist? I'm not the one slicing open animals and pulling their hearts out. You showed us how to do that." Why was I saying this? I had to be crazy, but my mouth kept talking. "I wasn't the one to put mice in a decompression jar and make people watch their eyes pop out."

"Are you suggesting, Mr. Honor Student, that I, your instructor, Mr. Boren Zick, am in league with the Evil One?" He was grinning as he pushed up his glasses. His zit had turned a fiery red.

"All I want to do is my project and not have to watch any more public mutilations of animals."

"You have until Friday," Zick said. "And this project had better not have any Satanist overtones."

Behind him, Ray was silently laughing and pointing at me and then wildly poking his finger into his fist.

"Andrea," Zick said, "when will your project be ready?"

"I can give my report tomorrow, Mr. Zick." Her shoulders went up and down when she spoke, and the front of her blouse strained tight. She glanced at me and smiled.

The bell rang, and everyone leapt to their feet except me and Andrea. She leaned toward me and said in a whisper just loud enough for me to hear over the commotion of books and backpacks and clumping feet, "That Ray is such an animal. You can do it to me anytime. I can do it better than your little Oriental friend." She squeezed her purse and shoe box up under her boobs.

Hormones made my ears ring. My nostrils probably flared.

"Well," she said, moving her shoulders and making everything above her waist wobble, "if you've got the want, I've got the. . . ." She winked and flounced away. I hobbled out the door.

After I bought a sandwich at the lunch counter, I met Pham out under one of the plum trees by the track. The

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sun was warm, and on the football field, a dozen people were playing fris-ball. Yellow butterflies flittered across the grass. This seemed like real life. I knew that big things ate small things and that sooner or later everything gets eaten, but Zick's idea that we were entitled to snuff life at will seemed like low-grade arrogance. And I was afraid of what he would let Ray do in class the next day.

Pham sat down next to me and opened up a plastic box with her lunch in it — rice balls wrapped in black seaweed. She was small and slim, and her skin was as smooth as warm butter. Her black hair was clipped back behind her ears with yellow clips and hung to the middle of her back. When she talked, she spoke almost in a whisper. Her voice was mostly breath.

She had been in the U.S. two years. During her escape on a boat with forty other people, she had seen pirates shoot her brother in the back of the head and throw her mother overboard for screaming about it. She watched her mother slowly drown. Now she lived with her aunt.

She offered me part of her lunch.

"Thanks," I said. "I need to ask you a favor. Zick moved up the date of my project, and I have to have it done by Friday. Would your uncle mind if I came over this evening and set up some equipment?"

"I think that be fine," she said. "He never go in that room anyway. How come you have to do project Friday?"

"I told Zick I didn't like seeing animals killed in class. Ray was killing rats today. He was cutting out their hearts."

"Cutting out their hearts? Why he does this?"

"He wanted to see if he could cut out a heart fast enough that it would keep beating."

"How come?"

"Ray likes to do demonstrations that bother people."

"Oh." She seemed to understand now. She bit a rice ball in half. "He would like my country."

"One time in fifth grade, he showed a friend how to hit somebody so it would hurt a lot. He used me as a part of the demonstration and then asked me which way hurt the most."

"Ah."

"He's a jerk." I wanted to change the subject. "Do you think there are ghosts in your uncle's house?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "He think so. Last night he call to say there was a mir-oh . . . a mir-ror —did I say that right? — a mirror in the closet."

"My mom has a mirror in her closet."

"But he d'not put it there. And he says it was a bad mirror. It d'not show his face in it. He says it —"

"Well, hi guys." It was Ray, with Andrea clinging to his side. She was all grins and squeezes, and she chew-

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ed her gum without closing her mouth. "Hey Dell, wanna be a member of the Rude Shitz? We're doing a membership drive. Wanna be a member and get some respect? All you gotta do is kill a dog with your bare hands." The blood on his cheek had dried to a flaky brown.

Andrea giggled and wiggled and popped her gum.

"The dog's gotta be over ten years and weigh less than fifteen pounds," he said. "And you're allowed to use a tire iron."

"Oh *Ray,*" Andrea said.

"And it has to be a gook dog. Wanna be a member? We'll get you a white girlfriend, too."

"He is a rectum," Pham said to me in her soft, airy voice. "Is that what I mean?"

"Yes. That's what you mean."

Andrea stopped chewing her gum.

"Watch your mouth, slope," Ray said.

I started to stand up, but Pham grabbed my arm and pulled me down. I was thinking about crushing his fucking skull.

"Stay," she said to me. "There are too many rectums in world to clean all of them. I know. I've seen many *big* ones." She grinned and made a loop with her arm.

Andrea started chewing her gum again. "C'mon, Ray."

"I seen you looking at Andrea in class," Ray said to me. "You remember what I done last year to that fat plughole that grabbed her tits?"

"You grabbed his tits back, didn't you?"

"C'mon, Ray."

He looked at me, and I ate a rice ball.

"C'mon, Ray."

He started grinning, as though he had just thought of something clever. "Yeah, babe." He reached behind her and squeezed one of her buns. "Yeah, let's go. I'll be seeing you later, slope-sucker."

Andrea was all grins and squeezes, and she chewed her gum without closing her mouth. Without Ray's seeing, she raised her eyebrows twice at me. "See you later," she said, and they walked away clinging to each other.

"I wish there were justice," I said.

"Can't have justice," Pham said. "Spend time wishing for nice weather. I heard American saying: 'Best revenge is living well.' Spend time living well. Can't be justice when rectums have legs. Old Vietnamese saying." With a smile, she offered me a second rice ball.

I liked her. She had gone through a hundred times what I ever would, and she was smiling. If there wasn't justice, maybe there was something else. Endurance, maybe. Or laughing.

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"When could we go over to your uncle's?"

"Anytime. You want to go there in afternoon or evening?"

"About five? Can I meet you there?"

She started rolling her shoulders around like Andrea and said, "You can meet me anywhere, white boy."

I liked her.

When I got home, my dad was sitting on the piano bench staring at the keyboard. My dad is an interesting person. He is an enigma, but he is an interesting enigma. He has a business card that reads "VLADO VERMICELLI: troubleshooter." That isn't his real name, but since he was in the army as a teenager, he doesn't know exactly who he is or what he is. In fact, it's very hard to know what he does know.

He thinks the army used him in some experiment that wiped out the boundary between his conscious and unconscious minds. So he says one name is as good as another. On some weekends, he goes over to San Francisco and does stand-up comedy in nightclubs under the name of Walter Roscoe. The rest of the time, he solves problems for people.

Last week, Mr. Sammartini, owner of a local TV station asked him if he could write a theme song for some program, and Dad had been working on that for several days now. When I came in the back door, it sounded like he was playing chopsticks very slowly backwards.

"Hi, Dad. How's it going?"

He was sitting there in a denim jacket and white boxer shorts with his hair sticking out in twenty directions. He looked like a madman, but when your conscious and unconscious minds are right in there together, in the same place at the same time, I guess once in a while you forget about combing your hair or putting your pants on. "Anything turning out?"

"I don't know," he said. He looked confused. "All I can figure out is that if you hit two keys that are next to each other, it sounds bad."

"When does Mr. Sammartini want this theme song?"

"Tomorrow. Boy, I don't know." He looked worried. He scratched under one of his arms. "A lot of keys here. Do you know why they made the black ones so small and put them up here where they're hard to reach?"

"Beats me. I think they're called sharps and flats."

"Strange," he said, staring at them.

"Dad, my science teacher moved up the due date of my project. Have you been able to get that stuff

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you were telling me about?"

"Stuff?"

"The camera, recording thermometer and barometer, that stuff?"

"Oh yeah." He hit a couple of keys down at the lower end. "I wonder who thought this thing up," he mumbled. "I called Mr. Sammartini, and he was very helpful. I got you a biostatic charge detector and a Kirlian photographic panel big enough to ride a bike through," he said. "And don't put your face in front of the open end of that tube gizmo — it's a net gun a guy at the zoo loaned him and that he loaned me."

"A net gun?"

"They use it on the baboons when they start to party."

"Thanks, Dad." I thought of Ray. "I might be able to find a use for it."

"Anytime." He plunked a few times on the keyboard and shook his head. "Why did they put so many keys on this thing?"

"What happens if you don't get the music done in time?"

"Mr. Sammartini said I'd work better if I didn't know. I told him no sweat. I was sure I'd studied music." He shrugged and sighed. "This is really complicated," he mumbled. "Did I study music?"

"If you did, it was before my time. Good luck, Dad. Is Mom home yet?"

"She's in the bedroom."

I went down the hall and looked in. She was sleeping on top of the bed in her clothes. They were trying something new at the hospital where she worked — rotating the shifts in ways no one could understand under the pretext of trying to see if they could get more work out of people. Mom had worked eighteen hours straight. She was an emergency room nurse, and with the new scheduling, she was irritable, crabby, and withdrawn, and that wasn't like her. Mom was usually really nice. I liked her.

I went back down to where my dad was. He was slowly experimenting with hitting three keys at a time. It sounded bad.

"Mom doesn't look so good, does she?"

"Nope." He made his hands like claws and dramatically hit a random bunch of keys. "That doesn't work either," he mumbled. "You may have noticed that she didn't take her uniform off before going to sleep."

"Yeah."

"She has to go back to work in an hour."

"Why doesn't she quit?"

"She's trying to wait them out." He looked up from the keyboard. "Son, what are you going to do with all that stuff?"

"Pham's uncle thinks his closet is haunted."

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"You're looking for ghosts?"

"Who knows? Maybe just rats."

He seemed to be thinking very hard. "Well, either way, if you see Richard Nixon, ask him how much he got paid for arranging Pearl Harbor." Then he started playing chopsticks backwards again, but I could see a little of his Walter Roscoe grin showing.

My dad.

I got all the stuff wedged into the trunk and backseat and was on my way over to Pham's Uncle Heng, when I noticed there was a car following me. It wasn't being subtle either — whoever it was, was right on my tail, but I couldn't see much because the Kirlian panel and the biostatic charge detector blocked most of my view.

At a stop sign, I felt a jolt as the other car's bumper hit mine. I stuck my head out the window and looked back — and there she was: Andrea, her head out the car window, waving and yelling at me, "Pull over — I have to tell you something! Pull over!"

So I did.

When she got in the front seat with me, hugging her purse and ever-present shoe box to her body, I said, "Look, I have only a minute. I have to set up all this stuff right away, or Zick's going to ream my transcript."

"Oh, that nasty man." Andrea had on white shorts that looked like they had been glued to her, and her tank top was so stretched out at her armpits that I could see that she had a pencil-eraser-sized mole on the side of her left breast.

I started to get that graspy feeling in my chest.

She put her big purse in the seat between us and held her shoe box on her beautiful knees. "I know you're kind of stuck on that Pham refugee person, but Dell. . . ." She rolled her shoulders, and her mole moved in little jiggling circles. "Dell, I can offer you things she can't. Big things. You don't know what you're missing."

"True, I don't," I said. My heart felt like it was sucking air. I had some pictures under my mattress of women who looked like Andrea, but I'd also seen Ray bang on guys who had done less than I already had. "Ray wouldn't like this," I said, but I was already asking myself just how much getting hit a few times would hurt. . . .

"Ray's a pinhead," she cooed, leaning toward me. Her tank top opened up, and so did my mouth. I could feel my heartbeat in my eyeballs. "I like guys who can think with something besides their priviates. Just answer me one question."

She leaned forward even more. I could see nipple. It was pale brown. I could see nipple. Oh God.

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"Just tell me this," she said. She took my left hand and turned it palm up and pressed it against her hanging boob. "Just tell me what that feels like."

"Uh. . . ."

"In your own words, just tell me what it's like."

"Soft. It feels soft."

"Tell me more," she purred.

"Warm," I said, choking up. Did adults do things like this? Did they risk death out of lust?

She put the shoe box on the dashboard and hooked her fingers over the upper edge of her tank top and pulled it all the way down and then let it snap back up under her breasts. She rolled her shoulders, and everything moved. Even in me, everything moved.

"Now," she said softly, "tell me what they look like."

All I could think was, "Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you." I was an animal.

You look funny," Pham said.

It was 5:20, and she met me in Heng's dirt and cement-chunk driveway. When I got out of the car, my legs were still rubbery.

"You O.K.?"

"Somebody ran into my back bumper at a stop sign," I said. "It rattled me a little." I was looking at Pham, but all I could see was Andrea's chest . . . Andrea's and those swooping curves . . . and that white skin and those brown circles and —

"You look real nervous."

"It was pretty scary." I went around to the trunk and put the key in the lock. I wasn't much for symbolic things, but when that key slid in, my knees buckled and banged into the bumper. I was still a virgin, but I was a virgin with a dream.

"What is all that stuff in backseat?"

"The two silver panels can tell if there's an electrical field between them that's caused by a living organism, and the square thing that looks like a door will take a picture of it. Here." I handed her the recording barometer and thermometer out of the trunk.

She took them and said with a nod toward me, "Pants unzipped."

I probably jumped like I had been stabbed. I turned my back and pulled the zipper up. It had been only halfway down.

"You *very* nervous," Pham said as she went toward the front door.

The zipper wasn't Andrea's fault. Not directly anyway. Mere man-made materials were not meant to take such stress.

Heng's place was basically a dump that he had scraped and shoveled out and then moved into. The neighborhood was a mixture of white trash, brown trash,

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black trash, blighted trees, yellow lawns, dusty streets, and Heng. In Vietnam he had been the manager of a bicycle factory.

He didn't look like he had moved since I had been to his house the one time before. He sat rocking in a scabbed-up old rocking chair in the corner of the living room. He looked seventy or eighty, but Pham said he was sixty-one. He was always smiling very hard, with his narrow eyes squinched up into thin slits and his face furrowed with dark wrinkles.

"Hello, Mr. Heng," I said, smiling and bowing a little. I didn't know exactly what to do, but it seemed to be the right thing.

"Yes," Heng said, nodding and rocking at the same time. "Thank you."

"I wanted to thank you for letting me come in your house and set up this equipment." I gestured a little with the barometer I was holding.

"Thank you," Heng said, still nodding. "Hello."

"He likes you," she said, leading me into the back room where the allegedly haunted closet was.

I nodded again at Heng and followed her. "He likes me? Why?"

"You treat him like he not crazy."

"In truth, it crossed my mind."

"Oh, Uncle Heng very crazy. He very bad zerked-out. But you treat him O.K."

The back room was about twelve by twelve feet, and empty except for the closet that had been built into the corner and stuck out into the room. The closet was about three feet square, hardly big enough to have the reputation it had.

The walls of the room had been painted brown and green and black at different times, wallpapered with a yellow vine pattern, and then apparently scraped down with a steel garden rake. The window had been broken out and then boarded up with a sheet of plywood, and the only light was a clear bulb in the overhead socket. The air smelled like old, damp wallpaper glue. It was the kind of room where Andrea could strip naked, and all I'd want to do would be leave.

Well, maybe not, but it would be a tough decision.

I turned the cracked glass doorknob on the closet and pulled it open. Empty. Just more dead air and a few lint balls in the corners. It didn't look haunted. On one of the inside walls, someone had written in orange crayon, "José loves Lauralee Poontang."

Maybe this was all a big mistake. Zick was going to enjoy hosing me over on this one.

We hauled in all the stuff, and every time I passed through the living room, Heng would be rocking and smiling and I would smile back

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and he would say, "Yes, thank you very much. O.K."

By the time I'd hooked up everything like the directions said, it was a little after eight, and the room was cluttered with power lines layered across the floor, chairs that Heng had dragged in to put some of the stuff on, and the Kirlian screen looked really impressive. I set it up right in front of the closet. It was an aluminum-framed rectangle, shaped like a door, and on its inside edges were what looked like steel comb-teeth. A coil-table connected it to a little printer that simultaneously charted out horizontal and vertical fluctuations in the patterns it picked up.

Pham had gone out and got a pizza, and when we finished, we sat against one of the few vacant spots against a wall and ate and admired the setup. It was very serious-looking, even if we ended up recording only a few rats.

Heng even got up and shuffled over and looked at it. He said something to Pham in Vietnamese and went back to his rocking chair.

"He say bad mirror show up at nine o'clock," she said between bites. "And he say he d'not want any pizza. He call it 'blood pie' because it have meat on it."

"Nine o'clock? How does he know?"

Pham shrugged. "Maybe every night the same."

"You said Uncle Heng was crazy."

"Oh yes. Very bats."

"Has he always been like that?"

"Oh no. Communists bury him alive and then dig him up fi' times. It make him zerked-out."

I had stopped chewing. "Five times they burried him alive?"

"Better than bury him dead." She bit into her third piece.

"Well," I said, "at least he smiles a lot."

"Oh, he not smiling," she said to me. "That like a . . . like this —" She clenched her teeth and drew back her lips. "What you call that?"

"A grimace."

"That what he do. At first I call him 'Happy Uncle Heng,' but I found out the sadder he got, the more he look like he smile. He not very happy since last time they bury him."

"Jesus."

We heard the front screen door slam and heavy footsteps clumping across the empty living room.

Ray stuck his head through the door. "Hi, guys," he said with a grin. Ray sauntered in, holding a pillowcase in one hand. Inside it, an animal thrashed around. "Cat," Ray said. "Probably a gook cat. Pretty frisky. Bet he's got a good heart." He looked around the room and pursed his lips. "Oooo. Lookit all the high-puke equipment you got in here. Looks like there's some

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torrid upchuck about to squirt down." He ran his fingers along the toothed inner edge of the Kirlian detector. "Hey phlegm-boy, your wacko old man steal this stuff for you?"

Ray stepped back and swung the cat at the frame. It hit it with a thump, and the cat yowled and the frame crashed into the recording barometer.

"God damn it, Ray!" I yelled, grabbing for the frame and missing it.

"Oh darn," Ray said. "This stuid cat busted something." He held up the pillowcase with one hand and drew back his other fist. On the pillowcase there was a small spot of blood. "Kitty needs to be punished."

"I give you fi' dollar for the cat," Pham said calmly.

Ray looked at her in mock surprise. He nodded his head at the pizza box. "Didn't you get enough to eat?"

"Fi' dollar," Pham said. She reached in her pocket and pulled out a metal clip with some ones in it. "Here. Fi' dollar for the cat."

"Whillikers," Ray said, lifting his eyebrows and bugging his eyes. "The football team must be payin' in quarters these days."

I swung at him, and he swung the cat at me, and we both missed each other, but the cat hit one of the biostatic charge detector panels, and the panel clanged and broke against the wall. When I looked back at Ray, he had his knife in one hand and the pillowcase in the other. The knife was spade-shaped, not more than six inches long, but it was an inch wide and it gleamed under the clear light bulb.

"Now," he said to Pham, "I'll give you the cat for five bucks and a piece of ass right now. Dell, you have to watch, and if I don't see some dink tit before I count to five, I do some Aztec surgery in the here and now." He teased the knife point around the lumps in the pillowcase. The cat moved feebly now. It made a small squeak when Ray poked it with the knife. "One-two," he said quickly.

Pham looked at me, and I looked at her, and then her eyes went very large and very round and she pointed at the closet. Ray saw it, too, and he turned to face it, but he still held the knife up to the cat.

Inside the closet, filling it up completely, was a thing that looked like a silver bubble — like a mirror —only it was curved, and inside it, behind the distorted reflection of the room, we could see vague dark shapes moving slowly back and forth.

The bubble bulged out and contracted and then bulged out again, as though it were breathing.

"What is this?" Ray demanded.

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His voice was a little unsteady. "Is this some scabass trick your wacko old man came up with? What is this? What the vuk is this?"

He backed up, and when the thing bulged out into the room again, he gave the cat a short swing and threw it at the bubble. It vanished inside the bubble's surface without a sound. And just like an autoteller giving a receipt, the instant the last corner of the pillowcase disappeared, a small slip of paper popped out of the bubble and fluttered down to the cruddy floor.

Ray looked at us, and we looked at each other. And on the piece of paper, we could all read the neat block letters printed on the front side:

CAT

"Neat trick,' Ray said with a grin. "I bet if I shove the gook in, I'll get a piece of paper back that says TWAT."

He grabbed her, and I grabbed the net gun. It was a tube about the size of my forearm and looked scary. I was thinking of netting them both and then kicking Ray in the head five or six times. I was starting to feel the need to get some relief.

"What's that?" Ray barked suspiciously, holding Pham with her back to him, one hand on her neck and the other clamped on her wrist.

"It's a net gun, Ray. They use it on baboons. It won't hurt either of you, but I will."

The mirror-bubble bloated a foot out of the closet door. Ray eyed it carefully and then gave Pham a shove away from him.

"Here," he said, "you can have back your slope." He was moving sideways toward the door, not taking his eyes off me, and I seriously-seriously considered wrapping him up right there and seeing what happened when he was shoved through the bubble.

Just before he got to the door, he said, "Oh yeah. One other thing, zit-dick." He reached over and knocked the recording thermometer off a chair, and it crashed on the floor. "This is a guarantee. Before graduation, the Rude Shitz are going to put a hog clamp on your nuts and then take your picture for your mom and dad. No way you can stop it. So poke your slope while you still can. Ta-ta."

I stood there even after the screen door had slammed, wishing I had webbed him. Now I had something else to look forward to.

Pham's hand touched my shoulder. "He very small rectum," she said. "Let's try something, to see what that thing is."

I put down the net gun and picked up the broken thermometer. "Let's put this into it," I said.

She nodded, and I stepped over to the thing. It had retracted till it

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was about even with the doorsill. Our reflections in it showed us with big noses.

Slowly I touched the edge of the bubble with the corner of the thermometer. I expected some resistance, but there wasn't any. Behind the swollen reflection of my hand, I could see those dark shapes, like blurry fish, moving slowly back and forth.

All at once the thermometer was snatched out of my hand and a slip of paper popped back out and slid between my fingers. On it was printed the word JUNK.

"Comedians," Pham said.

"What do you think's in there?"

"CIA," she said.

"I don't know . . . ," I said. This looked a little beyond any technology I'd heard about. "Maybe they're aliens. Or maniacs from the tenth dimension. Or the Welfare Department checking to see if Uncle Heng is having too much fun. D'you have some paper?"

From her purse, over by the grease-stained pizza box, she took out a little pink tablet and a ballpoint and gave them to me.

On one paper I printed, "Who are you?" and ripped it off and pushed it into the bubble. Again, instantaneously, another slip of paper was returned into my fingers, and on it was printed in neat block letters, WE ARE CURIOUS.

"CIA," Pham said, nodding.

I wrote another note: "We are also curious. What are you curious about?"

The answer was: WE WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU LIKE IT THERE.

Pham was reading the note, when Heng appeared in the doorway wearing his grimace-smile. He said some stuff to Pham and waved at the bubble.

"He wants to know if the mirror talks," she said. She looked again at the note and translated it for him.

Heng threw back his head and a barked a mirthless *"Ha!"* and quickly jabbered something else and .

"He say to tell them he d'not like it here and that politicians are shit-worms."

"O.K." I wrote it down.

"For me, tell them, 'Too much mean stuff.'" As I wrote that down, she said, "Ray a bad guy. Bad guys all over."

I wondered if I should add something of my own. How did I like it here? Here, in this room? In this town? How did I like being seventeen in this world? I thought of my mom and dad and Zick and Ray and of Heng being buried five times . . . and of Andrea. And I thought of what Ray might do with his knife if he knew I had given Andrea a breast exam.

For my message, I wrote, "At best, it's very risky." Then I

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thought a second and added, "How do you like it where you are? And where are you?"

I slipped it through the membrane, and the instantaneous answer was: WE'RE SOMEWHERE ELSE AND WE LIKE IT FINE.

I wrote, "If you're somewhere else, where are we?"

"CIA tell you nothing," Pham muttered.

I put the note through, and the return message said simply: CAGE 37.

"What that mean?" Pham asked.

I shrugged. "It doesn't mean anything to me." I started to write a note asking about "Cage 37," but at that moment the mirrored bubble stopped being there. It didn't pop or melt away — it just wasn't anymore. All it left behind was a little noise like a coin hitting the floor in the closet.

Cautiously, I stuck my head in, and in the corner on the floor, under the "José loves Lauralee Poontang" sign, was a metal disk. It was shiny and a little larger than a dime, but when I picked it up, it weighed nothing, and on one side were three little depressions, two above the other one, in the shape of a triangle. I hadn't ever seen anything like it, and neither had Pham, but it didn't look like anything special. It could have fallen off the wall when the bubble disappeared. Or the bubble could have left it. I shrugged again. Since puberty, nothing ever seemed to make a whole lot of sense.

"What we do now?" Pham asked.

"Go home, I guess." I looked around at the wrecked equipment. All of it, except the net gun, was trash. Mr. Sammartini would probably have my dad kneecapped. I had twenty-two hundred dollars saved for college, and that would probably about cover the cost of the printer. Well, if I couldn't go to college, I could go to work, I suppose.

"I wonder what happen to the cat," Pham said.

I thought a second. "Ask Heng if this thing comes back every night."

We both went into the living room. Heng sat there rocking and grimacing, and when Pham finished talking, he said very distinctly, "Yes." Then he pointed at me and said something else to her in Vietnamese.

Pham nodded at the coin-thing I was holding. "Uncle Heng ask if you want more of those."

"O.K.," I said. "Sure."

Heng got up out of his chair and did his bowlegged shuffle into the kitchen. I wondered what he had been like before he was buried five times. He opened the oven and took out a cigar box filled with the things and shoved them at me.

"Goo'ni'," he barked, and flailed his hand at the door.

We left.

When I got home, Mom was at work again and Dad was asleep. I had

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just enough energy to count the number of disks in the box Heng had given us — there were sixty-two — and pull off my clothes and get in bed. It had been a long day . . .

. . . humiliation in class; titillation in Andrea's car; strange weirdness in Heng's closet; realizing that I really liked Pham, but that Andrea, whom I didn't like very much at all, made my hormones scream for mercy . . . . Did adults have to put up with stuff like this? Greeps. And I got to see my college career get trashed . . . maybe I could sell mobile homes for a while and try again next year . . . and in return I got a box full of funny buttons, probably left there by José when he was snaking Lauralee Poontang. . . . Was this those "great teenage years" I had heard so much about? Was this what I was supposed to enjoy so much because adulthood was such a pain in the ass?

I had the distinct feeling that some crucial information had been left out somewhere, like the directions for my life had been written in Hong Kong and badly translated. "Be sure assemble emotion limiter before extending thorough pubberty, and handle limiter and external breasticals with foresight." Sure. And avoid maniacs regardless of what dimension they come from.

I rolled over and went to sleep. I dreamed of Pham. She had silver boobs that expanded and contracted and spoke to me in a foreign tongue, which I understood. I woke up out of the dream and wondered, What else can happen? How much worse can it get?

"This is my science project," Andrea said, putting her huge purse and her pink shoe box on the lab table in front of her. She clicked on the slide projector. Behind her, the screen lit up with the words MY SCIENCE PROJECT.

Today Andrea was wearing a blue and white checked sundress with spaghetti straps. I noticed I wasn't the only male paying close attention. Ray, however, was drawing pictures of exploding spaceships on his desk.

"As you all know," Andrea went on primly, "Ray is my boyfriend."

"Yo!" Ray said as he waved one hand over his head.

"Thank you," Mr. Zick said sourly. He sat off to the side of the room with his gradebook open and his pencil poised. With the eraser end he pushed his wire-rims up his nose. He really grimaced this time as the nosepads slid over his pimple. It was coming to a head. "Continue, Andrea."

"Well," she said, "I got Ray for my boyfriend because I wanted to do this project on. . . ." She studied at her notes. "On 'The Effect of Lust on One's Sense of Self-Preservation.' "

Ray was looking up from his airplane now. "She got me for the lust part," he said proudly.

"Actually," she said, "Ray was for

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the threatening part. Here are the two subjects of my experiment." She clicked to the next slide. It was of me and Ray. This didn't look promising.

"What is this?" I heard Ray mutter.

"What I wanted to do my project on," Andrea said, "was if lust could make a person disregard his own safety."

I felt my gonads begin to shrivel up. There were ugly ingredients here.

"Here," she said, "we can see the early stages." She ran through a succession of five or six slides of me looking down her dress. "I made these pictures using a camera concealed in this ordinary-looking shoe box."

That goddamned pink shoe box.

"Wait a minute," Ray was saying. "Wait a minute. You mean he was—"

"Quiet, Ray," Zick said tiredly, "or you won't get to use the spare rat after Andrea's finished. You take care of your personal business outside class."

"Right. I will, too."

There were a few *Oooo's* from around the room, and Ray's little pig eyes had images of the slaughterhouse in them.

"The most fascinating element of my experiment is that I'm going to do the last part of it right here in class, right after I show you the later stages of my subject's development." She was looking at me. I was her subject. Apparently I had developed. At the moment I was rapidly developing a lot of sweat.

She took a small tape recorder from her purse and turned it on loud. In the background was the sound of passing traffic. "In the later stages," she said, "the subject disregarded all personal safety." She clicked the slide projector.

There I was in her car, facing her and looking down her dress. "I shouldn't be here," my voice said. "If Ray found out, he'd murder me." Click of the projector, and there I was with my hands glued to her tank top, and like a moron I was saying, "Warm . . . they're very warm."

I glimpsed Zick studying the screen very carefully, and Ray was getting up from his desk.

The projector clicked, and there I was, the grinning fishhead, with my hands on her naked boobs, and the tape recorder was playing, "Oh God, if Ray finds out, oh God, oooh God. . . ."

Ray was already coming at me, but he had three rows of desks to get through and the door was on my side of the room, so I had a chance.

"Thus we see the conclusion of my experiment," Andrea said, making a wide gesture at me and Ray and the developing chaos.

"Hold it!" Zick was yelping. "What's going on?"

As I was on my way out the door, I heard Andrea saying, "And today, as a result of my project, I was accepted at U.C. Berkeley." Behind me there was lot of crashing and yelling, and

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I made myself gone.

I crept into my room, but no one seemed to be home anyway. My gray cat, Kubo, was lying asleep on a piece of paper on the middle of my bed. He stretched and opened his eyes and rolled over on his back.

I really didn't want to explain the ugly mess to my folks, even though they would try to understand. Except for all the wrecked equipment. Well, they might understand, but they certainly wouldn't like it. I had heard a rumor that Mr. Sammartini had killed his own parents to get control of his family's trucking business — but who knows? Maybe he was just lucky. Imagining my dad trying to explain in his wacked-out way to Sammartini that a hundred thousand dollars of his frontline equipment had been trashed in a West Side slumhouse .... It made me feel wormy inside.

Yesterday I was a happy guy. In twenty-four hours I had developed at least two life-threatening problems. But I got in a few incredible feels.

Kubo rolled over and said,"*Meah*," and when I looked over at him, I saw that the piece of paper was a note. It said, "Call Pham," and it gave a number I didn't recognize. So I called it.

It didn't get to finish one ring before she said, "Hello?" There was a lot of noise in the background.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"School. I heard abou' Andrea's project. Ray said he going to cut your dick off."

"Somehow I'm not surprised."

"I d'not think you should stay home. It would really hurt, you know? Go to my house, O.K.? He d'not know where I live. My aunt fix you dinner with us. O.K.?"

"Yeah, I appreciate it, Pham. I mean, if you heard what I did with Andrea and you're still willing to talk to me, I really appreciate it."

"It is O.K. I also never see real big ones like that till I come to California either. Bring those things Uncle Heng give you, you know? O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Go to my house now. Ray left school soon as principal told him he couldn't leave. So go now."

"Thanks. I will." We said good-bye and hung up. While we had been talking, Kubo had left the room and had come back in dragging the white sock he played with. He put it at my feet and looked up. The sock was his imitation mouse. If only people could be that civilized . . . at least Ray and Mr. Sammartini.

I gave him a few quick strokes. "Maybe later," I said. "I have to save my ass now."

I had the cigar box of metal things under my arm, and I was about to let the back screen slam, when I saw my mom and dad. They were out in the backyard, standing under the mulberry tree with their arms around each other. Mom still had her hospital whites on, and she was standing with

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her cheek pressed against Dad's chest.

I didn't want to intrude, but I was a little curious about what they were sayng, and since I could just barely hear them, I slowed down a moment and listened.

". . . and so I quit," Mom was saying. "I fooled myself into thinking that I had to play by their rules. I didn't." She moved her cheek against him. "I forgot what was important."

Dad said something I couldn't make out.

"No," Mom said, "I won't regret it. As long as I have you, I can deal with whatever I need to deal with."

My mom.

Pham's aunt fixed us a dinner of fried chicken, corn on the cob, and mashed potatoes. She was very proud of her "ethnic American cuisine." She used to teach history at the University of Saigon, but now she spends her days clipping coupons and cleaning other people's houses. A couple of times she admiringly referred to "the great American experiment," but given her circumstances, I didn't see how she could be so cheerful about it.

After dinner, which looked normal but which tasted strangely spicy, tangy, and generally great, Pham and I cleared off the table for her and spread out the box of buttons Uncle Heng had given us.

"All alike," Pham said.

They were about the size of big dimes, about the same color, with the three indentations on the lower half of one side, one below the other two.

"These belong to some American machine?" Pham asked.

"Not that I know of, but I suppose they could. From the sharpness of the edges and the way these dents are so precise, they look to me like they were pretty carefully made."

"No scratches either," Pham said, holding one at an angle to the light.

Now that was unusual, considering they had all been thrown together in a box.

We tapped on them against each other, rolled them around, stacked and restacked them, and I felt like a rat failing an intelligence test. I arranged several of them under the chair leg and tried to bend or break one, but nothing happened.

"Well," I said, "now what?"

Pham was looking very closely at the dents on one of the coins. "You know what," she said slowly, "in the middle of each of these little pits, there a dull spot, like something been rubbed on it. Like you stick something into pit."

I already had my Swiss pocketknife out. I pulled the toothpick out of it, picked up a coin, and poked into one of the top dents.

A strange thing happened.

The upper half of the coin face looked like it kind of went soft —

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moltenlike — and the number *1* formed and turned black. I ran my finger over its raised shape.

"I never see this kind of thing before," Pham said.

"Me either." I poked the toothpick into the dent again. The *1* turned into a *2*. And each time I touched the bottom of the indentation, the number ratcheted up.

Pham leaned close to me with her arm across the back of my shoulder and her fingertips touching my neck at the edge of my collar. I liked it.

I poked the other top indentation, and a second digit formed in the metal. I had a *41*. I also had the bottom indentation gleaming a bright red at me.

"Uh-oh," I said.

"What does this mean?" she asked under her breath. "Is it a bomb?"

I picked up one of the other disks and held it up to the light. In the bottom of that third indentation, there was the same shiny spot, probably meaning that somebody — using the term loosely — somebody else had poked something into it any number of times and it hadn't blown up.

I poised the toothpick over it. "Shall I?" I asked.

"Sure."

And while I was thinking twice, I remembered that on one of the messages from the thing in the closet, when I'd asked where we were, it said, "Cage 37."

"Let's try thirty-seven," I said, and poked the dents till that number came up. The red dot gleamed as bright as ever.

"O.K.," I said, and stuck the toothpick into it.

Nothing happened. I was glad.

"It d'not blow us up," Pham said.

"Well, let's try thirty-eight." I poked at the dents till I got thirty-eight. I stuck the toothpick into the gleaming red dot.

Weird stuff happened.

The first thing was more of a pukey feeling than anything else. Then I noticed that it hurt where I was leaning my elbows on the table — and the reason was that the table was no longer a slick Formica — it was rough, splintery planks. I looked up at Pham, and she was staring back at me in horror.

God knows what I looked like, but she was buck-toothed; had oily, stringy hair; dirty pockmarks across her cheeks; and crusted snot around the insides of her nostrils.

I fumbled with the disk I was holding, punched the upper right dent a bunch of times till I got a thirty-seven, and then I poked the red dot. It was like the film jerked, I had a wave of pukiness, and there we were again, sitting at a neat and clean Formica table, and Pham looked even better than ever.

"That wa' *bor*rible," she said. "Worse than movies."

"Wanta do it again?" I asked.

"This time," she said, "do a thirty-

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six, you know, so it only take one push on that thing to get back here."

"You think well," I said.

"I practice."

So I did a thirty-six. My guts churned again, but the rest of it wasn't nearly so bad. First thing, we checked out each other, and we looked the same. Several of the kitchen appliances were a different color, and the TV in the living room was on, and some guy was using a language we could only half-understand.

"Something smell bad," Pham said.

Something smelled like oily plastic. Out the window, through the twilight, I saw rows of towering chimneys, all pouring billows of gloom into the evening sky.

"Dirty place," Pham said. "Let's go home."

I got us back to thirty-seven.

"Say, what time is it?"

She looked over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. "Seven-thirty."

"I'd be interested in being at your Uncle Heng's at nine o'clock. We could ask the thing in the closet some interesting questions about this." I looked at the disk in my hand. "O.K.," I said, "let's try a high number."

"I d'know," Pham said slowly. "If thirty-eight was that bad . . . ."

"O.K.," I said, "how about we try a ninety-seven, and that way it'll take only four pokes at the first digit to get it back here."

"I d'know. That could be sixty times worse than this."

"Or it could just be sixty times more different." A part of me kind of hoped she'd talk me out of it.

"O.K. How fast can you poke into that four time?"

"Like lightning. Like the wind."

I set it for ninety-seven, looked at Pham, she took a deep breath, and said, "Let's go," and we did.

First I felt pukey, and then I saw the goddamned weasels — or *something* with a lot of teeth and claws — rushing me through some underground tunnel. They were as big as dogs, and they were really mad about something. I looked around for Pham, and if that was Pham, then I probably had a weevil head, too, and a mouth that looked like a slab of black meat in a bunch of briars. Somebody — or some*thing* — started screaming, and like a maniac I started raking at the disk I held in my claws, got some other number to come up, and got us out of there like quick.

Pham looked like a dog, sort of, except what should have been hair looked like moss, and we were standing up to each of our four knees in some kind of thick mud. First, I noticed there were bugs crawling all over us; second, that it was raining; and third, that the disk that was lying in front of me was going to be a little difficult to manipulate with paws and teeth. Bugs crawled around my snout, and I heard Pham whimper.

Pham . . . what I assumed was

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Pahm . . . shifted her feet as she watched for predators and water dripped off her black nose. Heavy, dead-looking trees rose up out of the swamp, and in their upper branches, hook-necked birds carefully watched us.

I was glad there were no weasels to deal with this time, because it took about five minutes and a dozen mouthfuls of mud to get my incisors to press into the disk to make us gone.

We ended up in sixteen. Sixteen was not a bad place. Pham and I looked like ourselves again, and there were a lot of slow things grazing around us that looked like something between cows and hippopotamuses. We were on a grassy plain, and some miles away, even though it was late evening, we could see the silver spires of a city.

"We could come back here," Pham said. "But I want to go home now."

I set the disk to thirty-seven and touched the red dot. Again we were sitting in her kitchen, leaning forward on her bright Formica table. I asked her what time it was, and she looked at the kitchen clock.

"Seven thirty-five. That d'not take any time at all."

We were both amazed. And we had sixty-two of the things.

We tried out a few more tricks with them and found they had a range of about two and a half feet, and it took about three seconds for the transfer to take place. In those three nauseous seconds, you could back off from the disk and stay here. If I went to nineteen while Pham stood away from me and watched, she just saw me standing there looking glazed for a second or two, even though it seemed to me I was walking around for five minutes in this gloomy warehouse before I pressed in thirty-seven and came back. But she didn't see me move at all. Nineteen was a grim place. All in all, by 8:30 we'd checked out a dozen or so places, and only sixteen wasn't bleak or creepy or like ninety-seven, which was just a screaming psycho's nightmare. We stayed out of the nineties altogether.

"Let's go to your uncle's now," I said. "D'you have a tablet and pen we could take? We have some better questions to ask tonight."

Outside, the air was warm and sweet with the smell of jasmin from the trellis on her aunt's patio. In the southern sky, Mars stood close to Antares, the red star in the heart of Scorpio. Together, they were like eyes.

Pham knocked on the screen door and called, "Uncle Heng?"

"O.K., be inside," he called back. "Open door."

He was sitting in his rocking chair in the corner of the room, rocking and grinning.

"We wanted to look in the closet again," I said, nodding once deeply.

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"May we, please?"

"Yes, thank you, O.K.," he said, waving his hand in front of his face as though shooing away gnats. "Yes, yes."

We moved some of the trash aside — everything looked hopelessly wrecked — and I started worrying again about my dad and Mr. Sammartini. Maybe I could sell some of the disks to keep my dad out of the hot water I was going to put him in. I didn't get to worry anymore, because right then, right on the dot of nine o'clock, the closet filled up with the slow-pulsing mirrored bubble.

I turned off the overhead light, and Pham and I eased up to it and tried to see through the surface into the inside. It was just like in the movies. Without even realizing it, we were nearly cheek to cheek, holding hands, and inside the thing was a faint yellow glow that lit up our faces. We couldn't see anything clearly, but there were vague angular outlines of things that didn't move and taller thin things — the "people," I guess — that seemed to drift back and forth, like they lived inside of Jell-O or something.

I wrote the first note: "We know how to use the metal disks."

Just like before, there was no time lag — I pushed the front edge of the slip of paper into the surface, and one of their notes popped out of it and fluttered to the floor.

In block letters the response was: GOOD FOR YOU.

Pham wrote,"What are those places?" and as the answer popped out, she said, "I meant *where*," and she shook her head and looked disgusted with herself.

The card read: THOSE ARE OTHER CAGES.

I looked at Pham, and Pham looked at me, and we both reread the card. Other cages?

"Other cages?" Pham said to me. "Like rats?"

I wrote the next question: "What are the cages for?"

The answer was: INTERACTIVE BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS ANAYLYSIS.

"What that mean?" Pham asked.

"I think it means they like to watch how we animals get along with each other."

"Like rats," Pham said.

On the notepad I wrote, "Are we your science project?"

The block letters on the card read, ONE OF MANY. NOTHING PERSONAL.

"Like rats," Pham said.

There was some clomping around in the living room, the screen door banged, and I heard Heng jabbering something angry-sounding.

Pham and I both got over to the door to see Ray holding off Heng with one arm — he turned his head and gave us a quick tongue-flicking grin. In his free hand he held a drawstring bag with a cat in it — he had the string pulled tight around the

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cat's neck so only its head stuck out. Its eyes bulged from choking.

"Hi, guys," he said as he swung the bag in a high overhead loop and brought it down on Heng's back. The cat screamed as it whumped on the old man's bent shoulders. Heng staggered off backward and sat down again in his rocker.

Ray looked pleased with himself. "See," he said, pointing at Heng, who was grinning-grimacing fiercely. "Gooks like to be knocked around."

"Whi' shi'," Heng said through his teeth. Ray didn't understand him.

"Lookit here," Ray said, holding up the bag by the drawstring. "This one's bigger. It'll be easier to get to his parts, Aztec style."

It was Kubo. His eyes were going wide and glassy, and then the lids would close halfway.

"This one's for tomorrow," Ray said with a smile. "Whatsa matter?"

"That's my cat," I said. One of us wasn't going to walk away from this one.

"It's mine now, unless you want to try to take him away from me." He had his bright spade-shaped knife out before I knew what he was doing, and held the tip at Kubo's throat. "Wanta try to take him away from me, pinprick?"

"I'll buy him from you," I said. "How much?"

"I give you twenty minutes with me," Pham interrupted.

"Half hour," Ray said, poking Kubo's neck with the knifepoint. Kubo made a slow *eeeea* squeak.

"Twenty minutes," Pham said. "If you need more, you a whi' weenie."

"O.K., let's do it. In there," he said, nodding at the room with the weird closet. "Come on, zit-brain. You need to see my technique."

I backed through the door, thinking about where I'd last seen the net gun — and then I saw it, in the far corner, under a tipped-over chair. Ray saw it, too.

He hooked the drawstring of the bag over a nail in the wall, and Kubo hung there looking dazed, but he recognized me and opened his mouth but couldn't make any noise. He probably thought I had some part in doing this to him since I wasn't helping him.

"Hand me that," Ray said to Pham, pointing at the net gun. "Pick it up by the open end, slot."

He didn't take his eyes off me when he reached for it, but I didn't care anymore — he was ruining my life for the fun of it. I grabbed the nearest thing — the broken Kirlian frame — and swung it over my head at him, but the net gun made a *poopf* sound, and I was tangled in cords and thrown backward. The edges of the net had weights in them, and they whipped around me, wrapped me tight, and I fell on my back and cracked my head on something very hard. For a second I couldn't see anything. Pham watched it all without expression.

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"O.K., white boy," she said to Ray, "show it to me."

As he reached for his zipper, he turned and winked at me and Pham buried the toe of her sneaker square between his legs, right behind his nuts. It sounded like she had kicked a block of cement. Ray took a sudden deep breath and looked surprised, frozen there, still holding his zipper between his fingers. Pham popped him in the same place again, and this time her foot crushed his knuckles, and I could hear fingers breaking.

Ray just stood there looking paralyzed. Pham looked around, picked up the empty net gun and, holding it in both hands, swung it back over her head and then brought it forward hard enough that when it slammed down on Ray's head, her toes came off the floor.

He rocked around with his mouth hanging open and his arms doing limp-wristed slow-motion flailing. Pham's lower jaw jutted out, and she put her hands on her hipbones and stepped toward him as though she had a few things she wanted to get off her mind. Ray backed up two steps, and his left heel touched the silver bubble in the closet.

Whatever was in there liked him. He was pulled slowly through, and when half his leg had disappeared into the thing, he saw what was happening and started to make, "Aah, aah, ahh!" noises. Up on the wall, Kubo stared with blurry interest.

When his other leg slipped through and he was up to his waist, he recovered enough from his beating to focus on Pham and wave his arms at her. "*Please*," he begged, "save me! Pull me out! Please!"

"We d'not need more rectums," Pham said.

Ray was up to his waist now, and inside the silver bubble where his body was being slowly pulled through, several dark shapes hovered and bobbled. "I can be good," he whimpered, glancing toward the door.

Through the slack in the net, I could barely see Uncle Heng standing there, grinning or grimacing as broadly as ever. "Whi' shi'," he mumbled.

Ray was up to his chest and trying to reach the closet doorframe with his hands, when Pham came over to me with the knife Ray had dropped, and began cutting me out.

"I'll be good!" Ray said, up to his neck. "It was just a joke!" And then his face went through, and the last we saw was the greasy top of his head — and as soon as that vanished, a cat popped out, just like one of the messages, and landed on its feet.

It was the one Ray had banged around and cut up the night before — but now the cat looked fine. Healthy and well fed, even, like it had had a lot of time to recuperate. It took one look at the three of us and trotted out the door between Heng's feet, tail high in the air.

"My ca' come back," Heng said,

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and turned and went back to his chair.

As I went over to unhook Kubo from the wall, a card with a message popped out of the bubble, and then the bubble blinked out of existence, leaving the closet empty.

Pham picked up the card, read it, and showed it to me. It said: THANKS. THIS ONE IS BIGGER.

I woke up the next morning to a lot of screaming and thumping. For a few seconds I thought I was in Cage 97 again and the weasels were after me. But when I was completely awake, I realized the yelling had an Italian accent.

Sammartini had returned. He'd probably seen his expensive equipment piled in the backseat of the car. It took up a lot less room than it used to.

I climbed out of bed and prepared to go take the heat, give Sammartini my college money, and offer myself into slavery to pay off the rest of it. On my dresser was the box of disks, and I blearily thought how neat it would be to just check out — go to Cage 17 and watch the hippo-cows until Sammartini forgot about me . . . or . . . .

Inspiration is a wonderful thing.

I got a robe on and got out there fast. My dad was sitting on the piano bench looking very confused.

Most of Sammartini's head was bloodshot — his eyes looked like they'd been washed out with martinis, and cobwebs of broken veins colored his cheeks and nose a blotchy red. But his suit looked very good — very expensive and custom-tailored to fit his overhung belly and square-cheeked bubble-buns. He was a rich man who couldn't believe that anyone who had less money than he had would dare offend him. He just couldn't believe it. It was beyond him.

"Your father owes me fifteen thousand dollars for the equipment I loaned him — ***and*** another ten thousand for breach of contract. You can't even read music!" he bellowed, and stomped his foot. His veins glowed. "Go ahead, play that," he said, pointing to the sheet of Chopin on the music rack. "Play it, you cockroach. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ."

My dad shrugged.

"*I* wrecked your stuff, Mr. Sammartini."

"*I can't believe this. Jesus H.* Christ. A whole family of them. Jesus Christ. Where do you kind of people come from anyway? You guys niggers or something? You lie, you bust up my stuff — you guys don't belong in the real world, you know that? The next time I hear the university needs some test animals, I'll recommend you people. Jesus. Wrecking my stuff, you know, could result in you having some serious medical problems. Jesus H. Christ."

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"Actually, sir," I said, "I'll pay for the stuff if you want me to."

My dad looked amused.

"*Want* you to?" Mr. Sammartini looked amazed. He threw his manicured hands over his head.

"And," I said, "as a token of my appreciation for the loan of the equipment, I wanted to give this to you as a kind of prepayment."

He looked at the disk carefully. "What kind of shit is this?"

"Well, sir—" (I handed him the toothpick out of my Swiss knife and stood back.) "—if you just press the little red light with this—"

"What is this 'ninety-seven' shit on here? I don't need this. I need my theme song and fifteen thousand dollars, snotbrain." But he took the toothpick and he pressed the red light on the disk, and then he just stood there looking like somebody had hit him with a Cadillac.

Originally, I'd set it on thirty-eight, just to get him worried and settle him down a little. But he was a ninety-seven-type scuzz.

After twenty seconds or so, my dad said, "Mr. Sammartini? Are you all right?" He looked at me. "Is he all right?"

I shrugged. "Looks to me like he's having some kine of seizure." Out the front window I could see his Continental with his driver leaning on the roof smoking a cigarette. "Why don't you go call that guy to come in and get him?"

While my dad was out of the room, I got the yardstick out of the hall closet and knocked the disk out of Sammartini's hands. I would deal with turning it off later.

When my dad got back into the room with the driver, Sammartini was sitting on the floor in the doorway, saying, "Face . . . face. . . ." Having dealt once with those weasels, I guessed they'd probably been throwing him around like a piece of meat and nibbling on his eyelids.

"Gosh," Dad said, "he looks like a little boy who does . . . does. . . ." A strange look came over his face. He looked at the piano and murmured, ". . . who does fine . . . ," and then he looked back at Sammartini, who was mumbling, "Face . . . face . . . ," and then back at the piano again, and shouted, "*That's it*"

"It is?" the driver said. He was a big horse-faced guy in a cheap suit, and he looked confused. A thoroughbred bent-nose.

Dad sat down at the piano bench, glanced at the sheet of Chopin, and started ripping it off across the keyboard at incredible speed. When he finished, he turned around, beaming, and pointed to the sheet music and said, "F-A-C-E and Every-Good-Boy-Does-Fine. *Ha*! I couldn't remember what notes went on the lines and spaces, but that's it!" He turned around and played a few measures of something big and dramatic and then looked back over his shoulder and

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said expansively, "How about a margarita, everybody?"

"Well," I said, "it's only 7:30, and I have to go to school."

"I'll have one," the driver said nervously. "I get, y'know, nervous, if I have to, y'know, touch him like physically."

The fat man sat there on the floor mumbling like an idiot, and I kind of felt sorry for him, but jeez. When you threaten somebody's family, I guess you can't kick too much if somebody throws a bunch of weasels at you and you get a bit chewed up.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Son?"

"You still have that button-maker thing, you know, that makes buttons that pin on your shirt?"

"It's in the top of my closet."

"Thanks. I might need it for my science project today."

The bent-nose had a margarita with my dad, and while I was getting ready for school, I heard him say he always suspected this would happen, since Mr. S. had such a temper. He was very apologetic, and after a nice little chat about his wife and kids, he and my dad dragged Sammartini out and dumped him in the backseat of the Continental. Sammartini drooled and babbled the whole way. Now he had a cage all to himself.

When I finally left, with my books under my arm, my dad was at the piano with a smile on his face and he was playing beautiful stuff, right straight out of his head.

My dad.

Pham had wished me well when she met me in the corridor outside my science class, and while we were talking, Andrea went in, smiled, and stuck her chest out a bit more.

"You got speech memorized?" Pham asked at the last minute.

"Well . . . sort of."

"You do O.K.," she said, and gave my arm a squeeze. "School be all over next week."

"I'm just a little worried Zick's going to be all over me in the meantime."

The bell rang, but I was in my seat before it stopped, and Zick was waiting for me, grinning and leaning forward on the demonstration table.

"Good morning, Dell. Spend last night with your demon friends?" Today the top of his pimple was white.

"My report's ready, sir."

"Report? Just a report? Where are your visual aids?"

"Um, there were some diagrams I was going to put on the board."

"Sure," I heard Andrea whisper.

"No demonstrations and no visual aids? Chalk diagrams alone aren't good enought, Dell. Don't you have any other visual aids? If you don't have any visual aids to go with your project, it just isn't going to be acceptable."

"I have lots of information to present—"

He was looking at the ceiling and shaking his head. "You have no charts,

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no demonstrations, and you expect me to let you try to brainwash these students into believing some Satanic litany you've got cooked up? You expect me to do that?"

"I just expected to be able to present my project, sir."

He was looking at me now. Behind her hand, Andrea whispered, "Bye-bye, loverboy."

"You expected to use my class as a forum for your deviant ideas, and that isn't going to happen. I've looked at your high school records, Dell, and I think a little extra college science would do you some good. Next project."

Before anyone could answer, I raised my hand and said, "Mr. Zick, I accept your decision. And to show you there are no hard feelings on my part, I wanted to give you this." I took the button out of my pocket. I hadn't had time to do a great job on it that morning, but a little glue and some low-grade artwork was all it took.

I got out of my desk and held the button in front of me so he could read it before he could tell me to sit down . . . and a big smile broke across his face.

"Ha-ha-haa!" he sort of laughed. " 'Darwin Was a Red' — maybe there's hope for you yet, Dell."

I moved fast, hit the red dot of the disk I'd glued into the back of the button, and tried to get away from him in three seconds, before the field took hold. I dropped it on his desk in front of him and caught just a glimpse of buzzard-sized bats coming out of the air at us and hoped my momentum would carry me past him and out of range of the thing before it could get a hold on me.

And I made it.

So there was Zick, standing immobilized in front of the class, his glasses sliding slowly over his pimple and down his nose as his head filled with visions of Cage 58. Fifty-eight wasn't so bad if you didn't mind rather large bats.

The class watched him for half a minute, and during that time, all he did was make a kind a "Buhh" sound and start to sweat pretty heavily. I sat back down, and then, like everyone else, I took out some homework and started doing that. The class was calm. After dealing with puberty for a few years, not much strikes us as too weird. Zick buhhed a few more times, and then the bell rang and we all left.

It was a beautiful day. Pham offered me part of her lunch, and we sat and ate and watched some people out on the field play fris-ball.

"What you want to do with all those little metal things?" Pham asked.

"Well, I'd kind of like to check out some of the other cages, but on the other hand, I'm using those things like a big animal who wants to beat up on the littler ones." I looked out

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across the football field and watched the white Frisbee sail in a long slow-motion arc. "I don't know. It seems like everybody is doing something mean to someone else — all for the best of reasons, of course."

A yellow butterfly landed on the plastic box her lunch had been in. It dipped its wings twice and flew toward the field. "Maybe Cage 37 made to be that way," she said.

"A depressing thought."

"Yes," she said, spreading out her hands and grinning, "but here we are."

She had a point. She had *the* point. It's a mean miracle, but here we are.

Across from us, the white Frisbee sailed through the summer air, and yellow butterflies flickered in the sun like scraps of notepaper dropped from the sky.

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Alan Foster's recent books include a novelization of ALIENS and a novel about Africa, INTO THE OUT OF (Warner). His new story concerns two oil company geologists and an encounter in the Louisiana swamps . . .

The Thunderer

BY

ALAN DEAN FOSTER

His feet big and flat-bottomed like heavy pirogue. His legs, dey thick as oaks and tall as slash pine. His body one great slab o' rock that flake off side o' tired old mountain, an' de arms hang from dat like twisty cypress.

He got a cane field full o' hair and skin de color o' de best bottom soil, cloud-big cheeks all sunk in and eyes like swamp pool wid no bottom. When de trees bend, when de ol' river talk loud, when de bull gator roar his lovey song, when de crook-flash walk de dark sky, den we say dat de Thunderer walkin', de Thunderer stalkin', de Thunderer . . . he talkin'*! . . .*

— old Louisiana folktale

Out southwest of New Orleans, there are places in parishes with names like Iberia and Cameron, Vermilion and Terrebonne, where sometimes even the rain has no ambition. Instead of falling hard and quicksilver, it just sort of dribbles down out of a winter sky the color of soiled mattresses. By the time it's worked its lazy way through the obstructing leaves and bushes and Spanish moss, you can almost hear it sigh in relief as it finally touches ground.

The Texon geologist tugged the slick bill of her rain cap lower over her forehead, and still the rain crawled for her eyes.

"You sure that place is around here, Crossett?"

"Yes, ma'am." The guide grinned. His narrow face erupted with alternating squares of ivory and gold, a thin parody of a Vasarely print. His hand, which always shook slightly, was an extension of the outboard motor. Voice of man and voice of motor were also much alike: steady, unexcited purrs.

"Jean Pearl been living here since

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before I was born," he added conversationally, peering to one side to see ahead. "Nobody around here knows who come first, Jean Pearl or Jean Pearl's cabin."

Mae Watkins looked back at him. "Since before you were born?" The geologist giggled, an infectious, cotton-candy sound that shoved aside the somberness of the rain-sogged swamp. "He must be *old*, then."

"Nobody knows, ma'am." Crossett leaned affectionately on the motor's arm, and the boat swung slightly to starboard. The trees closed wooden arms above. Watkins felt as though they were sliding weightlessly down a gray-green tunnel. The world here was composed of gray permutations, swamp colors homogenized by the storm. Trees were gray-green and gray-brown, the occasional heron white-gray, and gators and anhingas so gray as to be rendered invisible. Gray moss drifted on gray water.

There was a click forward, and she turned her attention to her assistant. "Lay off, Carey. You know how the company feels about shooting for sport."

The other geologist was barely into his thirties and less out of childhood. Reluctantly he slipped the safety back on and set the rifle across his knee. "May, he was a twenty-footer if he was an inch!"

"Africa's ten thousand miles away, Carey." She nodded to her right. "You're a geologist, not Frank Buck."

"Frank who?"

"Before your time."

He still looked disgusted. "Nobody had to know. I had a clean shot."

"I'd know." She let that percolate, then added, "If this trip pans out and we can confirm the hopes of the aerial survey, the company will buy you your own pool of gators and you can indulge yourself in an orgy of slaughter." Seeing his glum look, she said less accusingly, "And when you do, I want at least three pair of shoes, different styles, and bags to match."

He tried hard not to smile, and failed. Flustered, he turned away, scanned the nebulous line dividing island from water. It was hard to stay mad around Mae Watkins. No matter that she was fifteen years his senior and his superior on this trip. Anyone who could switch from boss to mother to coquette in the same sentence kept you eternally off-balance.

Anyhow, he consoled himself, there was always a chance a gator might charge them. Held tight in his palms, the wood of the rifle was hard and warm, slick, comfortable.

Crossett saw the geologist's fingers tighten around the gun, and smiled. He could sense what the younger man was thinking. On the bizarre happenstance that some crazy gator did burst out of the water nearby, that fool white boy was more likely to blow off his own foot than anything else.

Though in weather like this, one

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couldn't discount surprises. His own rifle lay near his feet. It was nicked and worn and the barrel wrapped with steel tape to hold it together. No matter. What counted was where the bullet ended up, not what it emerged from.

Rain tickled his eyebrows. Fog and drizzle teased his vision. "There she be, ma'am. Just like I said."

"Yes, Crossett. Just like you said." She arranged equipment, poking into the lockers set below the seats. The photos and charts she ignored. The rain wouldn't hurt them. They'd been laminated before setting out from Styrene three days ago.

Carey Briscoe set his rifle down and sniffed resignedly as they neared the island. The shack drawing closer resembled the exoskeleton of a long-dead bug whose innards had long since decayed and putrified, leaving only a shell behind. Dozens of sheet-metal and tin roofing scraps covered the roof, a quilt held together with nails instead of thread.

Two faded windows flanked the center door, rectangular eyes bordering a sagging nose. A front porch sagged alarmingly in odd places. There were no signs, not on the building, not on the collapsing jetty that thrust out into the bayou.

They slid neatly up to the tiny pier, bumping against frayed eye sockets of old tires. "Watch your step, folks." Crossett was looping a line around a splintery piling. "Jetty's kind of worn."

"Worn, hell." Like a kid testing a hot bath, Briscoe gingerly put one foot, then the other, onto the first planks. He gave Watkins a hand up, then studied the cabin. "How does he make a living here? Whom can he sell to?"

"Trappers, mostly." Crossett was lugging two large gas cans out of the back of the boat. They clanged noisily against each other, fruity echoes of distant thunder. "No roads out this way. But the swamp folk, they know he's here."

They slogged toward the cabin. "Interesting old structure." Watkins somehow found beauty even in the dump they were approaching. To her it was picturesque. To anyone else, it was a slum. Semantics, mused Briscoe.

"As to why it, and its owner, are here, that's obvious," she said cheerily. "The man likes his privacy. Suppose he ran a store in a big town, like Lafayette? What would he do with the extra money? Buy a private place out here in the woods and have to commute."

"Very funny." Briscoe gave her a sour look as they stepped up onto the porch, out of the rain. There was a dog there, lying against the house. Probably supporting it, he thought. The shaggy lump was an amalgam of all dogs, a true *weltburgher* of pooches, a canine compendium of all the breeds of all the lands and ages. A

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mutt. There was little difference between its coat and the moss dangling from nearby live oak branches.

At their arrival it raised its head and surveyed them with a practiced eye, then dropped to the porch again. It did not let its head down. It literally dropped, landing with a distinctive *thump.*

Crossett moved to knock. The door opened before he could. Standing in the portal was either the most Gallic black man or blackest Frenchman Watkins had ever seen. Also the oldest. It was fitting that he was all of a tricolor. Hair, mustache, teeth, and eyes were white; skin was black-blue like ink, and in keeping with the day's coloring, his clothes were gray. He was slightly bent at the waist, but seemed alert and lively. Not at all like the ancient wreck she'd expected from Crossett's description.

"'Lo, Charlie Crossett." His voice was husky but not cracked.

"Jean Pearl." Their guide nodded minutely and held up the two cans. "Gas?"

"Yep."

Conversation hereabouts, Watkins mused, was as muted as the scenery.

"I'll get it for you." The old man took up the two cans and retreated inside, closing the door behind him.

"Friendly sort," said Briscoe, meaning the opposite. "He stores his gasoline inside his house?"

"In back." Crossett picked his teeth with a piece of porch. "Oh, Jean Pearl, he friendly enough." A rodent of indeterminable pedigree scampered into view, and Crossett spat at it. "Like the lady say, he just like his privacy."

He also liked to take his time. While they waited, Watkins and Briscoe passed the minutes discussing anticlines and salt domes. Around them the rain intensified. A really worthwhile storm unfolded, droplets hammering the rich earth with liquid persistence.

Eventually the door was pulled inward and Pearl reemerged. He handed the filled cans to Crossett.

"Goin' back now, I 'spect?" The query was unexpected.

"No, Jean Pearl. These folks down from Styrene. Oil people."

"Huh! Know-it-alls."

Watkins smiled at him. "I suppose you don't think much of us, do you? Tearing up your beautiful swamps with our rigs?"

Pearl surprised her by responding with a wheezing chuckle. "You crazy fool people! What I care about swamp? You go tear up all you want."

"Don't you like it here?" Briscoe was unable to resolve the statement with Crossett's insistence that Pearl loved his privacy.

"Like it? Like the swamp? Like copperheads and water moc'sins, gators and rats and skeeters big as you little finger? You crazy for sure, boy." He shrugged. "But what Jean Pearl to do? I born here; I live here too much my

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life. For sure I gon' die here. I got no place else I know, no place else to go. Like it? Boy, you want to tear up the swamp, you got Jean Pearl, his blessings." Abruptly his attitude changed drastically.

"But not 'round here, not tonight, yes?" His voice had turned solemn, anxious instead of challenging. "You good fella, Charlie," he told their guide. "I know you family from when 'fore you born. I know you momma and papa." He gestured callously at the two geologists, speaking as though they weren't there.

"These folk, I don' know, I don' care. But you pretty good guy. You go back nort'east, Charlie. You don' go west, you don' go south. I tell you, the Thunderer, he out on night like 'tis for sure."

"You a good man yourself, Jean Pearl." Crossett regarded the oldster affectionately. "We thank you for your warning, but we have to see to our business."

"Warning?" Briscoe looked interested.

So did Watkins. "What's this 'Thunderer' he's talking about, Crossett?"

Their guide looked embarrassed. "Pay him no mind, ma'am. It an old local folk superstition. Country tale. The Cajuns, they claim they get it from the Indians, who here first, and everyone else get it from the Cajuns." His smile returned. "The Cajuns, they great storytellers. It make a nice tale to scare the children with during a fry, or when everyone out froggiggin'."

"I'm always interested in folk legends." Watkins looked kindly at the recluse. "What's a Thunderer, Mr. Pearl?"

"You oil people. You should know." Pearl snorted. "The Thunderer, he make you oil for you."

Briscoe struggled not to laugh. "With all due respect, sir, petroleum is formed when decomposing organic matter is subjected to tremendous heat and pressure. Nobody 'makes' it."

"You smart boy, you. Ol' Jean Pearl, he can' fool you." Pearl waggled a wrinkled finger at him. "You find Thunderer, maybe then you find some oil, yes."

"In that case, he's just the chap we'd like to meet," said Briscoe gently.

"What is he supposed to be like?" Unobtrusively, Watkins had pulled out a pen and was fishing in her diary for a blank page.

"Not 'supposed' . . . is."

"Excuse me. What *is* he like?"

"Not for me to say. The Thunderer, he shy fella. Stay sleep under swamp all time 'cept few nights every year like this one. He big 'round as cypress, have biggest gator in swamp for toothpick. Like to drink oil, and when he can' find it, he make it."

Having lost interest, a bored Briscoe had turned away and was studying a chart.

"I see." Watkins's pen squiggled on

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the page she'd opened to. She finished jotting, then looked up. "He's sort of a local Bigfoot, a southern Sasquatch. Like a big, hairy man, is he?"

"You smart oil people, I can' hide nothin' from you." He stared imploringly at Crossett. "I can' stop you goin', Charlie. I see that. You been in city too long much. You forget you momma's talk."

"No, Jean Pearl." Crossett spoke softly, humoringly. "I haven't forgotten her, or Papa either. I haven't forgotten they had nothin', and that I got a boat and will soon have a new one, and a new gun, for helping these folks in their work. I don' forget easy, man. Thanks for your concern."

Pearl turned away, and looked so distraught that Watkins was moved to reassure him. "Don't worry about us, Mr. Pearl. We're armed, and Carey here's a pretty good shot, just as I'm certain Mr. Crossett is. We'll be O.K."

"You have trouble," Pearl replied firmly, "you fire t'ree time. If I hear, Lightning and me — and he indicated the dog, which might have twitched at the mention of its name and might have not — "we send for help."

"That's very gracious of you," she said. "How much do I owe you for the gas?" She had her wallet out.

"Four gallon and tenth . . . only five dollar."

"Jean Pearl. . . ."

The old man glanced angrily at Crossett. "I take back what I say about you bein' good fella, Charlie. *Mirableu* . . . four dollar, then."

The geologist pulled a damp five from her billfold. "Here, keep it . . . for your concern." She noticed Crossett's disapproving look but did not react.

Back in the boat, slipping the line from the piling, Crossett said admonishingly, "You shouldn't do that."

"Why not?" She settled herself back on the outboard's center seat. "He looked like he could use the money, and Texon can afford it. Even if we don't find any oil."

"It not that." Crossett got the engine started and headed them out into the bayou. "Now he always think he put one over on you."

"I don't mind," she said easily. "His concern for us was touching, even if misplaced."

"Bigfoots," snorted Briscoe. He spat out warm rainwater. "Let's check out these coordinates, plant our charges, take our readings, and get the hell back to Styrene. I feel like I'll never be dry again. . . ."

They did not reach the place marked on their charts that night. As they turned to land on a high island, the wind picked up, moaning through the trees and moss, making the swamp sound like the recreation room of an asylum. Rain blew sideways, sneaking around inside their hoods to crawl wetly down ears and necks.

"What do you think, Crossett?" Watkins peered out of the pop-tent at the sky as the guide jogged back up

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from their beached boat, a locker under each arm.

"I think it plenty damn wet, ma'am." He handed her the lockers, one at a time, then slipped inside the tent, a roll of thunder on his heels. "I think we should make supper and listen to the radio."

As she spooned in her meal, Watkins reflected that advances in science still hadn't found a way to make freeze-dried food taste like food. It was tasty, even spicy, but it was the taste of spiced cardboard. She put aside the tin of macaroni and tuna, and fiddled with the dial on the radio until she'd located the marine weather band.

"Tropical storm," she announced eventually, echoing the now silent broadcaster. She nudged the radio into a corner. "Not a hurricane . . . not yet. And it's moving west. Ought to miss us by plenty, even if it should develop into something." She eyed Crossett. "What's your opinion?"

He considered briefly. "I think we only in danger of getting mighty soaked. You want to stay and work, I stay, too."

"I didn't ask for acquiescence, Crosset. I asked what you thought. You know this country better than we do. I've been through two hurricanes for Texon, one at Styrene and one at Maracaibo. That's enough."

"I gave you my honest opinion, ma'am. I think we be O.K."

"Good." Briscoe was sopping up the remainder of his cheese sauce with a biscuit. Watkins winced as she watched him. He actually seemed to like the stuff. "I'd hate to motor back to town and have to tell them we wasted over a week of company time."

"That's settled, then. We stay. Carey, see if you can find something interesting on the radio."

He nodded, set down his scoured plate, and pulled over the unit. "Anything in particular you'd like to hear?"

She leaned back onto her bedroll. "Beethoven or Bee Gees, it doesn't matter to me. . . ."

The wind continued to howl incoherently around them, battering fitfully at the nylon walls of the tent. It shrugged off all attempts to force entry, the tubular aluminum frame forming a snug, secure dome overhead. Their weight kept it tight against the ground.

Watkins found herself awake and turned her head sluggishly. A figure was moving about inside the tent. "Carey?"

"No, ma'am, it me," came the deeper whisper.

"Oh, Crossett." She let her head flop down on the pillow, and irritatatedly adjusted her hairnet. "What's up?"

"I afraid the water rising, ma'am. Oh, we O.K. way up here, in the trees. But I want to make sure of our boat."

"Good. Be sure and snap the flap on your way out, will you?"

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"You stay nice and dry, ma'am. I'll be careful."

She had a brief glimpse of gray in motion. The thrumming of rain and wind was momentarily louder as the guide slipped out through the flap. She heard the flap snap catch behind him, and lay back down.

"What's going on?" Briscoe's blanket-muffled voice.

"Crossett. Gone to check out the boat. Shut up and go back to sleep."

She found herself able to return only halfway to the relaxing oblivion of sleep. The uneven ground seemed to bother her more now than when she'd first lain down, and she tossed and turned restlessly.

Suddenly she discovered herself sitting straight up, wide awake in that occasionally unreal fashion that strikes without warning. She looked around. The tent was unchanged. Outside, rain continued to pummel the earth. It sounded as though the wind had dropped slightly.

"Carey. Carey," she whispered insistently, "wake up, man."

"Huh . . . something wrong?"

"What time did Crossett go out?"

Briscoe was rubbing his eyes; he yawned. "How the hell should I know? He went out?"

"To check on the boat. Remember?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah." He glanced idly toward the third bedroll. It was empty. Not back yet, huh?" He looked vaguely puzzled.

"No." She had a thought, fumbled through her bag, and extricated her billfold. In the near blackness she had to feel for the bills and credit cards. Everything seemed to be there. She wasn't embarrassed, either by the thought or her action in following it up. After all, she was a child of the city, not the country.

"Maybe he's having trouble with the boat," Briscoe suggested.

She shook her head impatiently. "I'll bet it's been at least an hour." Rolling over, she unlatched the tent flap and looked out into driving rain. Nothing. A flash of lightning revealed the outboard, securely beached and tied to a cypress stump. But no Crossett. The lightning faded, leaving blue patches on her retinas. Thunder skipped like a stone across her ears. She let the flap fall and didn't bother to secure it.

"Well?" Now awake, Briscoe was sitting up on his foam pad and staring at her.

She shook her head negatively and chewed her lower lip.

"Don't look so damn solemn," he advised her. "Probably he wandered off somewhere, maybe looking for a better place to tie the boat up. Want some coffee, long as we're awake?" He leaned on one side and began hunting in the darkness for the lantern.

"Huh-uh, thanks. Crossett would've come back and told us if he were going to be gone this long."

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A glow filled the tent as Briscoe got the Coleman going. "Not necessarily. Polite as he is, he might not want to wake us. It could be, though, that he hurt himself. Easy to slip out in that muck." He sounded sympathetic and disgusted all at once.

"I don't relish going out looking for him. I agree that if he's not back in, say, fifteen minutes, we probably ought to get dressed and go hunt him up. . . ." He stopped moving, one hand holding the tiny grasshopper stove and the other a packet of coffee.

"What is it?"

"Shut up. There's something outside," he whispered.

She froze. Several minutes went by, during which they could hear only the steady percussion of the rain and the puffing wind.

"Nothing, I guess," he said finally. He grinned. "You know, I just had a thought. Maybe our good guide's using this opportunity to show us city slickers that out here in the swamp anybody can be deluded by a little bad weather and a rambling tall story." He got the grasshopper going and set a pot of water on it.

"O.K., Crossett!" he abruptly shouted. "Come on in and get yourself warm. The coffee's boiling and we're not."

There was no response. Below, agitated water lapped at the meager shore. Briscoe shrugged. "Let him get soaked, then. I swear, if he comes tumbling in here and drenches us. . . ."

"NURRRRRR . . . !"

It was thunder, but dull thunder, not sharp and clean like the kind that walks the treetops, but a rich, rasping ululation that had nothing to do with electric charges. It sounded again, on a rising inflection this time, and while it did not originate in the heavens, it came from a source almost as primal. A feral thunder.

Watkins found herself turning upside down as she rose into the air. The flaming grasshopper stove tumbled past her and shot out the open tent flap. Lockers, radio, food, charts, bedrolls . . . all fell in a surreal stream past her. Her head was bent to her chest, and her hands went out instinctively. Then she did a complete somersault, her hips falling past her head. Somewhere above her, Briscoe was yelling about his legs, up at the other end of the tent. Aluminum tubing snapped like fresh popcorn around her.

So this is how a cat in a sack feels, she thought wildly. Then there was air and rain in her face. Seconds later there was pain, splitting her backside and racing up her spine, as she hit the ground.

Rolling over, she mumbled weakly. "Carey . . . ?" A voice was alternately screaming and cursing in the hazy distance, legs and pain and guns all whipped up together in a verbal froth of anger and terror. Her mouth was full of mud. She started to lift up on her hands, then collapsed as an unseen

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tormentor jabbed a long needle into her coccyx.

"Oh God. . . ." She lay on her side, her right arm under her. The screaming and demanding went on behind her.

Her gaze turned toward the noise. At the same time she became aware of a thick, rich stench, like creosote. Lightning danced in a night sky of gray crepe.

Outlined in the light was the Thunderer. Occasionally it would let out a querulous bellow, a rumble like a simmering volcano. It shook her, mostly inside. She thought, a mite hysterically, of the reported sightings of such legends as the yeti and Bigfoot, describing a hairy man or manlike ape eight or nine feet tall. How silly and foolish people are, she thought chidingly! Even the greatest of imaginary horrors fail when measured against the real thing.

What stood in the now faded discharge of energy and light was at least seventeen feet high at the shoulder, and it stood in a hunched-over position. Long arms dragged the ground, ending in great burl-knuckles that backed steam-shovel-sized paws. Long white claws curved back into the palms. It was only remotely manlike, a grotesque hybrid of simian and gargoyle. It had ears like a bat's, vast black eyes, and a prognathous jaw from which protruded a pair of upcurving tusks, like a warthog's.

She'd glimpsed a short, twitching tail, bald as a rat's. The entire slowly heaving mass was covered with short, bristly hairs, sparse but evenly distributed. Between the hairs the skin was composed of large scales, like those of a tarpon.

It was holding the collapsed tent in one paw. She started to crawl away, not yet thinking of retreating to the boat, but only to put distance between herself and that transcendentally hideous form. She also worked to ignore the steady sobbing that was coming from within the smashed shape of the tent.

"UNNN . . . NURRRRR . . . !" it bellowed. Another hand the size of their boat came off the ground, closed over its companion, and squeezed. There was a last, mercifully short shriek from within the tent. Then silence, save for rain and wind. The creature appeared to be exerting great strength. Watkins imagined she could detect a faint glow emanating from between those tightly pressed paws.

Thoughts of the size of those paws had reminded her of the boat. Thoughts of the boat reminded her of the guns lying within. As she painfully dragged herself through the muck, she considered poor Carey's modest .30-.30 and Crossett's ancient over-and-under. She struggled to her feet. One hand pressed tight over the fire in her lower back as though that would somehow ward off the agony. As she stood, another needle pierced her left ankle and she nearly fell. Brok-

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en? She couldn't tell.

She might as well throw mud at the gigantus as use either of the guns. But there was something else: a tightly wrapped pack of gelignite charges, for making soundings. If she could set a detonator in just one charge, place it where the monster might step nearby, it ought to discourage it. Perhaps even kill it.

She had no time to consider where the monster was, and refused to consider what it might be doing with what remained of Carey. All her energies, all her thoughts, were concentrated on reaching the boat. It appeared undisturbed, bobbing nervously in the fractured water. In the middle, beneath her seat, should be the small, reinforced locker holding the charges. She reached the bow . . . and slipped.

No doubt about it, she thought with an odd disinterest, her ankle was definitely broken. She lay breathing heavily, rain pelting her mud-streaked face. Her arms moved weakly on the wet ground.

Have to . . . get . . . charges. . . .

Despite the rain, she inched forward. The earth grew wetter and slipperier beneath her. Must ignore the pain, she told herself. Pretend it doesn't exist. Refusing to accede to positive thinking, the pain grew worse. Her femur was a log in a fireplace, burning evenly.

She paused. Moisture covered her mouth. She licked her lips. Not water: thicker, pungent . . . familiar.

She glanced downward. She was lying, not in thin mud or a puddle of rain, but in thick oil. It must, she thought wildly, be a natural pool, oozing to the surface. That meant a potentially huge field requiring little drilling. Just drop in the pumps and suck it out. The company would be pleased.

The boat, the boat . . . she forced herself ahead. Hand, knee, hand, knee. . . . Maybe it wouldn't notice her, a dim, slow-moving little lump in the darkness. Her head bumped something: the side of the boat.

Up now, she ordered herself. Hand grip gunwale, other hand grip, pull . . . pull, damnit!

Her head was over the side. Ahead, still secure beneath the center seat, was the small metal locker holding the charges. It was neatly latched and untouched. She started to pull herself into the boat.

Something made her nose wrinkle.

Creosote.

They found the boat and the remnants of the tent a week later. The hurricane had spent its strength and petered out over Alabama.

"Damn shame," Hardin muttered, kneeling to pick up a battered, broken shape. "This might've been the radio."

"Might," agreed his disconsolate companion. Weinberger had worked in Styrene with both missing geolo-

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gists. His eyes surveyed the storm-battered swamp, the bayou behind them where an iron ring was still tied to a stump of cypress. It was all they'd found of the survey party's missing outboard.

Nearby was a small pool of oil, a smudge on the earth. Stains showed it had recently been modestly larger. Shreds of clothing lay scattered around and within the stained soil.

"Looks like the storm tore the clothes right off their backs."

Hardin had his hands on his hips and nudged the blackened fragments of polyester and nylon. "Hundred twenty mile-per-hour winds could do that, sure. Looks like they found some oil, too."

"Afraid not, Sheriff." Weinberger eyed the stained earth and the bit of fluid remaining with an experienced gaze, and indicated the traces of two similar pools nearby. "They must have had it with them, though I'm damned if I can figure why. That old geezer back upstream said they bought only gas from him."

A glint of metal caught his eye, and he bent to recover an oil-stained lump of dull gold-colored slag. It was about the size of a belt buckle.

"Wonder what this was?" He chucked it aside and sighed. "Oh, the oil? It's fresh, new. Hasn't come out of the ground. No, I'm afraid they didn't find anything at all. . . ."

Coming soon

Next month: "Spelling God with the Wrong Blocks," suspenseful science fiction by James Morrow; stories by Terry Carr, Michael Shea and others.

Soon: new stories from Kate Wilhelm, Thomas M. Disch, Ron Goulart, John Kessel, Lisa Tuttle and many others. Use the coupon on page 69.

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Usually we hear of parents who have difficulty "letting go" of their children. In "Letters to Mother," we are presented with the reverse situation . . . to the nth degree. Chet Williamson, in addition to contributing to F&SF *in the past, has also written for* Playboy, The New Yorker *and* Twilight Zone.

Letters to Mother

BY
CHET WILLIAMSON

I

Dear Mother,

I suppose that writing a letter to you now is foolish. Most people would say that you're gone, beyond hearing. Father would. But you're too real to me, too alive and vital, for me to ever think of you as completely gone. My memories of you have been so rich and vivid — of walking in the garden with you, of how you used to fuss so over my dresses, of how understanding you were, both you and Father, when my marriage broke up. Those memories won't die, Mother.

I wish you could have seen Father at the funeral. He was so sad. He feels very guilty, I believe. If you'd have known how truly bad he feels, you never would have done what you did. It wasn't right, Mother. I wish you hadn't done it, and I know Father feels the same way. He hasn't seen Kathy since. I don't think he will anymore. But I'll take very good care of him. In spite of what he did, I still love him so.

I love you, too, Mother. Somehow, somewhere, you'll read this and you'll know. I'll put it in the little carved wooden box you brought me from Mexico. It will stay there, just as you stay in my thoughts.

I think of you constantly.

Your loving daughter

II

Dear Mother,

I should have known it would be too good to last.

He's marrying her, Mother, marrying Kathy. I thought that a year — and has it been a whole year since you left us? — would make him forget her,

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but it was you he wanted to forget, Mother.

They had been seeing each other behind my back the whole time — and I felt like such a fool when I found out. I asked him why, and he told me that he needed someone to love him; and when I said *I* loved him, he laughed at me and kissed me and said that what he needed was more than I could give. I got angry then, Mother, and asked how he could be *sure* that she loved him. She was so young, and how did he know she wasn't just interested in his money?

That made *him* mad then, and he told me he *knew* she loved him because she had agreed to the procedure when it was time. You wouldn't know about the procedure, Mother. The Burdick Procedure is its full name, after the man who developed it. I don't understand the details, but if one person is dying, another, healthy, person can be linked to him somehow, so that the healthy body acts to keep the dying one alive. It's very new, but they think that both people can be kept alive far beyond their normal life spans. Some of the people who helped in the first experiments said that they could actually share the thoughts of the other person, but they didn't go all the way, because once the link is made, there's no going back. The pair can no longer live apart. And neither one can *do* anything — not even watch the video — so it's a true sacrifice on the healthy one's part, though it's a beautiful thing to think of a husband and wife sharing their thoughts and memories for who knows how long — maybe forever. If only you and Father could have done that. It would have been like making your love immortal.

But he and *Kathy* filled out the papers, and he told me that that was how he knew she loved him. So I went to see her, Mother. It was the first time I ever met her face-to-face, and I was so surprised. I knew she was young, but she doesn't look any older than I, Mother..

I asked her if she really loved him, and of course she told me she did; and when I asked her if she loved his money, too, she just said that certainly that was part of it, that Father wouldn't be the man he was without his money. Then I said that since Father was so much older than she, it was likely that he would die first, and was she really ready to go through with the procedure. Oh Mother, she smiled just like a crocodile, and I knew she was lying. But she only said of course she would, that it would be a pleasure to spend all those years sharing the thoughts of a man like Father.

I couldn't talk to her anymore after that. To love someone as much as I love Father, and to see him throw his life away (and yours, too, Mother!) over a whore like that is more than I can bear.

I will *not* go to the wedding, Moth-

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er. You can rest secure in that knowledge.

I think of you constantly.

Your loving daughter

III

Dear Mother,

I knew it all along. Three years. Such a little time for love to fade, and such a great love as Kathy claimed she had. He's dying of cancer, Mother, as I'm sure she feared most. I'm sure she wished that he would have had a stroke, or died in an accident, or gotten ill and quickly faded somewhere on one of his visits to the other side of the world, so she couldn't have gotten there in time. But she played the odds and lost. There is plenty of time for the procedure.

I saw him today. He looks so frail that it would break your heart, and all he could say was thank God. Thank God for Kathy and the procedure. And she sat there in the corner, pale as death, tears in her eyes and her lips clamped shut, not saying a word. I looked at her while he was clenching my hand with all his strength, as if I could keep him from slipping away before it was time, before tomorrow's procedure was done. I looked at her, Mother, and I saw so much fear that she made Father look brave in comparison. She got up and left the room, and Father said to me, she's a good woman, she's so good to me — just nervous is all, just nervous.

I followed her and talked to her in the lounge. I won't, she said. I won't do it; no one can make me. She was actually crying, Mother. I didn't know that she could cry. You signed the papers, I told her. When you married him, you agreed to. But she said she wouldn't, that it was stupid, like burying wives with dead kings, and that there was nothing in the papers that said she had to. I asked to see them then, and she had them right in her purse. Oh, she was so clever, so ready for anything. But she was right. I read all through them, and there was no way to *force* her to do it. Then, I said, if you're not going to do it, why are you crying? She looked at me as if I were some kind of monster, and told me that she loved him. But suddenly I realized the truth. You won't get any money, I said. If you don't do it, you won't get a cent. And I could see from her face that I was right. But she said she didn't care, that she'd rather be alive and poor.

I went back to Father's room then, and asked him if he really wanted to undergo the procedure instead of drifting off into a quiet sleep, and he told me yes, that he did not want to die. I asked him, Mother, what there was about death that terrified him so. Was he afraid that there wouldn't be an afterlife? And he cried, and he told me he was afraid there *would* be, and that he would see you there, Mother, and he couldn't bear that.

Oh Mother, it's not because he

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doesn't love you; it's because he *does*. And I cried, too, and held him, loving him so much and wanting him to be happy, and loving you too, Mother. And then I came home, trying to think of what I could do for Father. Please help me find the answer, Mother. I will listen for your voice.

I think of you constantly.

Your loving daughter

IV

Dear Mother,

Father and I are together now. It was so simple. I called Kathy that night, and we worked it out. The next morning — this past morning? A year ago? Time means so little now —I signed all my property over to her, so now she has what she wanted, and she gave me the papers, and now I have what I suppose *I* always wanted. Father and I are as close as we can be.

Kathy's and my age were nearly the same, height and weight were similar, and our blood types were identical — that was the key to it all. And why would hospital personnel check? Why would they think anyone else would offer herself as a substi-

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tute? And even if they find out the truth, it's too late now to change it.

Oh Mother, Father was so surprised to find himself with me! It was just in time, too — he had slipped into a coma in the morning. But I brought him back to life. *I* did it. I explained to him — *thought* to him, as my thoughts reach out to you now — what had happened, and he was angry. He actually believed that Kathy had wanted to and that I had stopped her, though I told him the whole truth. Still he was angry.

And then I learned that I was stronger than he was — my thoughts, Mother — and that I could calm him, although he can still be angry or sad in a very small part of himself, a hidden part that we don't share. Not yet.

It's so good now that we're all together again. You *are* with us, Mother, just as you have always been with me. Sometimes Father is bad, and wants to think about Kathy. But I won't let him. We don't think about her at all anymore.

We think about *you*, Mother.

We think of you constantly.

Your loving daughter

Your faithful husband

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George Zebrowski offers a stimulating new story about a sterile, post-plague United States and a 119-year-old president who is implementing a foreign policy based on treason. Mr. Zebrowski's latest book (as editor) is NEBULA AWARDS 21 (HBJ).

Behind the Night

BY
GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

Behind the night . . . somewhere afar
Some white tremendous daybreak.
—Rupert Brooke

Clear nights let in the cold of space. Earth loses its heat and is open to the void.

I tensed with fear and gulped the crisp October air, halting my exoskeleton. Finally I relaxed enough for the walking-bones to respond again to my muscles, and I continued my march toward the crumbling spire of the Washington Monument. If, by some quirk of time, he might have seen me, Thomas Jefferson would have observed a grotesque, motorized colossus striding across the deserted city, steel soles snapping on the asphalt. The stars twinkled fitfully, as if to keep from freezing.

My muscles ached from the skeleton's stretching gait, but I was determined to go the distance. It was one of my remaining holds on life, a ritual victory of decaying flesh over the hard pavement, of stubbornness over space. Few triumphs were left to me. I loosened and contracted within my elaborate cane, grateful that it was powerless to move without the feeble impetus of my nervous system.

Cold crept into my lungs; breath fogged my glasses. The surgeon who might have given me new eyes was dead, and he had not lived to teach anyone else his skills. I turned right before the monument and circled back toward my house. The asphalt ended. I came onto broken concrete, which sharpened my mechanical footfalls. Echoes flew among the empty brownstones and deserted office buildings, cracking like distant gunshots.

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I was in the last stretch now, grimacing at the moon and stars, weary of confronting the truth about the world and my place in it. They were all long dead on Luna and in the stations — the trained, highly motivated men and women who by now should have been commanding bases on the planets were skeletons inside exhausted life-supports. All contact had ceased by the turn of the century.

I approached the house, marched up the ramp, and stopped; then slowly I stepped out of the metal bones. Earth's weary pull dragged at me as I shuffled to the heavy oak door. The knob seemed unyielding as I grasped its coldness, pushed the door open, and went inside. I stumbled to the study and sat down in the high-backed chair by the book wall.

A shape sat in the chair that faced the french windows.

"Is that you, Jake?" I asked.

"Yes, it's me."

The emptying world outside crumbled away. Infinities pressed in at the windows.

"How's your wife, Jake?" I asked, trying to make small talk. It was all that Jake and his wife could do to scavenge in the local stores for durable provisions. There was enough for perhaps a million people, but Washington would never see that many again. The food would outlast the citizenry.

"She's fine, Mr. President."

"Please, Jake, call me Henry," I insisted.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sayre." Jake would never come any closer to familiarity.

Wind beat at the windows. A pane shattered upstairs; there was a sudden draft, and the lights flickered. I wondered how many lines would have to fail in order to shut down the reactors. Something crashed outside the front door.

"I'll see to it, Jake." My heart quickened as I stood up.

When I opened the front door, I saw that the wind had knocked down my walking-bones. The huge skeleton lay on its back across the ramp. There was no quick way to stand it up again, I realized. Jake would have to rig a pulley from the second-floor balcony.

What have we come to? I asked, imagining my lifeless body in the exoskeleton. What do you do when you can't shake deep disappointment in the way you did when young? You could count on disappointments to come and go in those days; you could force your blinders back on and demand happiness. Maybe you were really happy then and merely sour now? No — you won't get over it; you've beaten life for the last time; this is the truth of things, and you finally see the terror of it; nothing will ever open your eyes to hope again. The universe-beast has always watched you, ready to trample you to death as soon as it suspected that you'd glimpsed its true nature; it can't stand to be revealed and understood; above all, it hates to be expected.

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There will be no Jake to lift me back into life with a pulley when I fall down.

I sat up in bed and pushed the button on the night table. The secretary of defense faded into view on the far wall.

"What is it, Cy?"

"Wake up, Henry."

"I'm listening."

"The fleet's moved off the African shore, twenty vessels on a course for Florida, from our readings. The missiles are targeted."

"Come off it, Cy."

"I know your views, Henry, but we can't just sit by and let it happen. It's proceeding in the way I predicted."

"We can't do anything else."

"We sure as hell can!"

His old brain seemed to need danger to keep alert.

"Maybe the Soviets are behind this, despite appearances."

"No, no, Cy, they're fading just as we are. Look, it's two. Let's talk in the morning. We'll know more."

"Very well, Mr. President," he said sounding as if I might see it his way by then.

The screen darkened. Cy's fears slipped into me like cold stones. We lived comfortably enough, but the plague denied us a generation with which to take hold of the future. Cy couldn't accept that it was a choice between emptiness and the invaders. They would come anyway after we were all gone. It wasn't a matter of barbarians at the gates, but of necessary migrations. New peoples would fill our emptying spaces, I told myself as I drifted back into sleep.

I stood up by the bed and stepped into my slippers.

"Good morning, Henry," Dr. Fein said. "Cy's outside."

"I know. I'll see him after you."

"Oh no, you won't," Dr. Fein sang out, shaking her gray head. "You'll nap after this shot."

"Do you believe you can keep me going much longer, Phyl?"

"Of course — all the researchers feel better on this stuff. If we can keep working for another year, we may gain thirty." The trembling in her face seemed to be lessening, but I couldn't be sure.

"It's probably just the pep talks you give yourselves," I said. "We're all likely too far gone to reverse the decay. It takes younger bodies to make immortals."

"Decay? It's only chemistry, Henry. Bodies can be cleaned and renewed, cell by cell. Your 119 years prove that."

"But you still can't get anyone to reproduce."

"That's more complex. Environmental poisoning was nothing compared to what we did to the human body. Our immune drugs killed the plagues, but we were left with few

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who were young or healthy enough to reproduce, and no scientific community to carry on research or even teach. There just aren't enough Americans left to do the work that needs to be done."

"What was the last estimate?"

"Fewer than a hundred thousand."

"Give me the injection and get out of here." I sat down on the bed and watched her draw the clear liquid into the syringe. I lay down and closed my eyes. The needle pricked my arm. Phyl covered me with a blanket. I felt tenderness toward her.

"You'll see, Henry," she said softly, "you'll see."

"Phyl, do you really believe your ova will produce eggs again?" I asked.

"It's possible," she said.

I smiled. "When you're ready, I'll service you."

"Foul mouth," she said as she left.

I felt drowsy. Deserted cities stood in my mind. Clocks marked unimaginable lengths of time as I imagined the liquid slipping through my body, cleaning cells, boosting immune processes, carrying me back through endless ages toward my younger self. . . .

Cy Kneale was watching me from the foot of my bed. The lines in his face were like cracks in dried mud, and it seemed that they should run up and cover his bald head.

Henry, are you awake?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"The fleet's course is unchanged. They're behaving as if we'll do nothing."

"But they're not hostile."

Cy grimaced, deepening his cracks.

"We have the room for them," I added.

"This is our country, Henry. We must protect it for the time when we start growing again. And we will, we will, even if we have to start turning out new people in steel wombs."

"If we last—" The swiftness of the dying shook me again. Human science is too frail, I thought. Destroy the practitioners, the teachers, and only books are left. Knowledge goes slowly then, creeping again toward basics and old triumphs. New peaks can't even be attempted. Phyllis Fein was a fifth-rater, by her own admission. It would take her years to do what a first-rate team might do in a few months. She had been lucky up to now.

"Henry," Cy began again, "you took an oath."

"What do you want? You want me to get ready to kill? How many?"

"There are twenty ships. Maybe twenty thousand people."

"I don't want to keep them out, and neither do you. Be honest."

"They're going to invade our country, Mr. President."

"Let them."

"You can't be serious! What about your constitutional duty?"

"You're inflexible, Cy. Too much has changed."

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"You're refusing to face facts."

"They're not an army, Cy."

"Florida will be their beachhead," Cy continued. "They'll secure the state capital. In time they'll come and occupy Washington."

"We'll be gone by then." I sat up and examined my hands, looking for signs of improvement. The fingers were still gnarly, the skin still loose and spotted.

"It's treason! We can't let them see that we're weak and unwilling to defend our land."

I gazed into his sunken gray eyes. "You'll obey your commander in chief," I said. His wrinkled face relaxed, weary with fear. "Do you think I'm mad?"

"Don't make fun of me, Henry." He seemed genuinely hurt and saddened. "You're not mad, just very wrong. Maybe this is the end."

"Well, don't just lie down and die," I said, trying to cheer my damaged Secretary.

"At least consider warning them off. Think of the legalities!"

"Don't worry, Cy," I said, feeling tired again. So much for Phyl's potion. "You could shoot me," I mumbled, but he didn't hear me.

The missile's eyes became my own. I opened them and saw the fleet below as I dropped toward it.

My eyes exploded, burning my brain.

I blinked. Afternoon sunlight filtered into my bedroom through the flimsy white curtains. The air seemed warmer, as if spring were near.

I sat up, feeling clearheaded. I got out of bed and walked over to the window. My fallen walking-bones still lay below. I pushed open the windows and took a deep breath. Jake's wife came in as I turned around.

"Where's Jake, Leonore? He usually comes in."

"Sir, he died last night." She placed my tray on the breakfast table.

"What? Didn't the doctor see him?"

"There wasn't enough serum. Takes a long time to make it, the doctor said." She bowed her head, but I sensed that she was not greatly affected.

"I'm sorry, I'm very sorry."

"He was very old."

"He was a kid of seventy-seven!"

"Don't trouble yourself, sir. Jake is at peace. I'll be here if you ring." She turned and left the room.

We're old, but we look forward, I thought, as if there were a place to go to, a place waiting.

I felt stronger, even if most of it was due to rest. I went back to the bed, picked up my robe, and slipped it on easily. I sat down at the table, swallowed my megavitamins with orange juice, and began to sip my coffee as I remembered one spring morning when I had made love to my wife. Alicia, I have not forgotten.

So much would be forgotten when we were all gone. New things would

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arise, and also be lost one day; and there was no place in which the lost might be gathered.

I looked around the room, and suddenly infinity was again pressing in at every window.

I was a moose, wading in a stream and drinking the water that ran down from the glacier. The icy liquid bathed my haunches, making me urinate. I stared blandly, at home in the world around me. . . .

"They'll be off our coast in a few days." Cy's voice hovered over my bed. "How long are you going to dither? It's time to act!"

Phyl's cheeks were flushed as I made love to her. She and I were taking hold of the future, mingling our genetic inheritance, projecting ourselves forward in time. . . .

"Henry, wake up!"

I opened my eyes and struggled to focus them. Cy was not in the bedroom, but on the screen. I peered at him through half-closed eyelids. Phyl wrapped herself around me. Her body was firm, demanding as she yielded. I fought the fatigue that flowed through my limbs. . . .

"Look at a human being and what do you see?" she asked. "A creature so temporary that it must above all else devote itself to its own reproduction. Two sexes make as much as possible out of judgments made on the basis of plumage and the sight of each other's genitalia. The looks that pass between men and women speak of selection, of an impersonal process. These are not creatures who belong to themselves, Henry. These are relay-race runners. . . ."

I preferred my dream-discussion with Phyl to Cy's ravings.

"We are lust, but we don't last," I said.

She smiled and said, "When you look at a human being, you see the outer, visible fulfillment of the genes. Attraction is a response to this outward display of wares. It's best displayed in dance. All the best moments of variant positions can be seen. . . ."

Smiling couples paraded in the park, arm in arm. Selection was over for them; they had found each other.

"Children are chances cast into the future. That explains the innocent arrogance of those who have them. The future is ours! We have thrown our anchors into it!"

"Perhaps we should become our own posterity," I said, thinking that we were a castrated nation. Our sense of the future was gone. There was no social fabric into which the individual could weave himself and survive death. . . .

"They're getting ready, Henry!" Cy's voice boomed. "They'll be landing soon!" He recited a litany of phrases, and they all came down to mass murder.

I realized that sexual infidelity

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would be a killing matter for Cy; it would not be enough for him to chase the stranger's genes away from the contest; they would have to be removed entirely from the game. . . .

"Mr. President, you must come down to the War Room!"

Phyl was smoking a cigarette. Her eyes sparkled. "The child fulfills the parents' godlike desires," she said. "Lovers also extend themselves into the unknown through each other. If possible, we would project ourselves into every part of the universe, until we could feel it as we feel our own bodies. . . ."

"Mr. President!"

"Why should I bother?" I asked sleepily.

"You're aware that decisions can be made without you? The vice-president is here, and the Senate as well."

The vice-president was half blind; the so-called Senate was an old woman and three codgers who weren't up to one good stem-winder collectively. As the government's medical officer, Phyl would never declare me incompetent.

"O.K., I'll come," I said finally, not wanting Cy to even try. "Send the car."

"I'll send one even if I have to drive it myself."

It would be nice to see people. I closed my eyes as the screen faded. Lovers displayed themselves in the park behind my lids, giving assurance that there would be a future.

"Why do you bother to smoke?" I asked Phyl as she came back into my field of vision. "It's bad for you."

"I don't inhale very deeply; you know that."

"What a waste of tobacco."

"We all have more past than future," she said.

"Unless your work succeeds."

"How do you feel?"

"Sleepy, as if I'm growing again. Does that mean anything, or am I just tired?"

"We'll see."

I once saw lightning fry a squirrel. It was unfair; all that space, but the bolt had seemed intent on piercing that small animal on exactly that bit of road. Yet the bolt had to strike somewhere; it was not free in that regard. The sonata of survival is unaffected by our views of it; we have yet to learn how to change more than a few notes without creating dissonances. Life requires the deterioration of the body, the dashing of hopes, the death of love, to produce a head full of fading thoughts.

I was feeling weak when I came into the War Room that evening. Phyl had not arrived with my injection, but the thought that Cy might contrive to declare me incompetent kept me going. I sat down in my swivel chair and faced the giant screens.

The left screen showed the incoming fleet as seen by cameras on the Florida coast; the middle screen pro-

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vided a vertical satellite view; the right-hand screen was an ocean view from a robot vessel.

I swung left and faced Cy. The Joint Chiefs sat behind him. Two seats were empty. The uniforms of the three attending generals were dirty and wrinkled.

"We must hit them now," Cy said.

Armstrong, Florman, and Engelberg nodded behind him on cue. The room was too dark for me to see their eyes.

"Let's wait and see," I said.

"You'll see, Henry,. It's an invasion."

"I never said it wouldn't be."

The big ships were releasing landing craft as we spoke. The view at my left pulled back to show the full size of the amphibious force.

"Traditional assault landing," Florman said in a low, growling voice, "no doubt about it."

The satellite view showed craft nudging up against the beach and releasing microbes.

"What more do you need?" Cy demanded. Behind him, Engelberg seemed to be asleep.

The left- and right-hand screens were dark. The satellite view showed dark organisms spreading across the white beach.

"They're unopposed, Cy. This half of the planet is nearly deserted."

The left screen lit up. A man came up from the water. There were children behind him. He was dark, stocky, and young. I had not seen someone so young in a long time. He was probably not even forty. As he squinted in the bright sun and looked around, men and women in jeans, robes, and tunics gathered behind him.

"A real military man," I said.

The children ran back and forth across the sand. I noticed a girl with tightly braided hair.

"Those children are also our hold on the future," I said. "You want me to depopulate posterity?"

"Surrender — that's what it is." Cy put his face in his hands and wept.

"Cy, they have no weapons," I pleaded. "Trees must obey the wind or break."

He looked up suddenly. "Their pricks and bellies are their weapons," he said softly. "They'll whelp all over our country while we die!"

I shrugged. "Age can't replace reproduction."

"In time . . . ," he started to say.

"We're not succeeding at longevity. Phyl is still not sure it will ever work."

We stared at each other from separate islands.

"If we kill them now," he said slowly, "then it will be *our* children who will repopulate the continent."

"If we ever have them. You'd kill for that?"

He sat up straight, and I knew that our conversation was over. "You're incompetent, Henry. Phyl and the vice-president will be here soon to

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take over unless you come to your senses and push back these hordes."

He was bluffing, I was sure. "A good cell is all the four of you will need," I said as I sat back and drew the pistol from my shoulder holster. There was a victory left for me to win, after all, and I was grateful.

The ants in the satellite view were people close up. Palms waved in a gentle breeze; turquoise waves lapped at the shore of a new universe of light and life as I faced Cy.

"They're just immigrants, Cy. We'll declare them citizens, if that will make you feel better. Our endless winter for their spring. Let them begin the world anew."

He gazed at me reproachfully.

"There's never been an answer for the likes of us," I continued, "and we don't need one. Leave us be, Cy. If we live, fine. Let them say that our persistence was brave."

Cy grunted and shifted in his chair. "Speak for yourself." My finger tightened on the trigger.

"We should have been dust by now," I said.

He looked at me with despair and contempt. I felt his hatred as he stood up. My trigger finger trembled; no one was going to cheat me of my last victory. Cy couldn't fire nuclear missiles without removing me from office first, and it was far from certain that the vice-president would cooperate with him; but he could kill people with conventional robot bombers if he seized control of the War Room.

"You're giving it all away," he said, and I was sure that he was going to lunge at me.

But he turned and left, and I relaxed my grip on the gun.

Imagine they are us, I wanted to shout after him, *if we could renew ourselves!*

I looked at the silent generals. It was too late for them to change masters.

Cy resigned, and I never saw him again.

My garden is not quite square; untrimmed hedges soften the angles. The grass is tall, but the blades cower before the weeds. Fireflies hover near the ground at night, blinking like exploding stars.

I sit here in the misty mornings. The garden seems a miniature jungle from somewhere in time's dawn, and I listen to my growing silence, wondering if perhaps something is listening to me. My thoughts fit together, seeking a clearer song. The past bleeds in my mental vise, whispering, *we counted on you to secure our future,* voices drowning in my inward sea of regrets.

I see Phyl's dream of a single immortal generation moving forward across the ages — a deathless river of life, once straight and now curve upon meandering curve of convoluted custom, arcane ceremony, and un-

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broken memory. Nothing is said directly in this world: no face wears its true expression; no word carries its obvious meaning. And I conclude that the past is everything without death's forgetfulness. The future will be the past; the present is past; the past will never be past.

But when I think of the reality — that when you're dead they'll put you somewhere in the earth to fall apart forever — my thoughts rise up and seek alternatives. The stars will age as you decompose into dust. And finally there will be only little bits of you, enduring until the earth and sun are gone, and you'll be spread in the ever-black of space, not quite gone, still a part of something, but in reality nothing at all. . . .

There is a listener in my vacant garden. He shapes my growing stillness, and I feel that silence is the way to the reasonable shore. The sea yields to my strokes as I struggle with myself to land through the chaos of breakers, pulling to free myself from the salty gullet of nature, but the beast's slippery tongue continues to taste me. . . .

The mystery of the reasonable shore beckons; beyond it waits a quiet continent of light, where I will cease to be what I was given to be — a human beast who seeks to be everything and calls it tragedy when he fails, who carries death in his cells and cannot yet completely hate it. . . .

Slowly, as I began to feel stronger and could no longer ignore the fact that Phyl's treatment was working, my thoughts turned away from death. Longevity began to promise more than the dead end envisioned in my night thoughts. Every life is a miracle of some kind, passing through from somewhere to somewhere else. People had tried to increase *their* kind of miracle by stamping their children with "invented here and nowhere else." So why should I not reinvent myself? Why should I not see what develops from this point onward?

I had never really understood human history, why people in groups behave as they do. I still know only bits and pieces, but that's all there is to understand. Social systems, those great temporal arks that seek to sail forever while individuals perish, have never been more in control of themselves than individuals; and perhaps it should not be otherwise. We need a partly uncontrollable universe, both social and natural, to draw us out, to use us up, to get the best out of us. The leaves on the trees and the fires of the stars are no different. Inside and outside are the mysteries between which we drift, catching our flesh on difficulties, bloodying ourselves in doubtful victories, seeking certainties as we cry out to a nameless listener. It is just as right for me to go on living as it might have been for me to die. I had come to the edge of everything and passed over to the other side. It remains for me to ensure that my con-

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tinued life does not become a crime.

Larger groups are coming into Washington this spring. I watch them wander around, looking at the buildings, staying in one place, then another. I keep out of their way.

Sometimes they puzzle over my fallen walking-bones in front of the house. I look forward to the day when the population increases, and I'll be able to go out among people in safety, without attracting the attention of the new authorities.

Phyl visits me, but I wonder if she comes only out of scientific curiosity. Her group in Bethesda must be very careful about calling attention to itself.

"What will you do?" she asked me one afternoon in the garden. "You've dissolved the government, destroyed potentially harmful centers of information and control — what are you aiming at?"

I shrugged. "To wander around, maybe fall in love."

She swallowed gently. "You're just a lusty Southern boy at heart," she said.

"Perhaps someday I'll have a better past."

"You're looking far ahead."

She gave me my injection.

"Your group will have to move," I said after a silence.

"Where can we go?"

"There's always the retreat in the mountains at NORAD. Plenty of luxury R&R apartments there, and lab space, supplies. And I have the keys."

She looked worried.

"Look," I said, "it's self-serving, sure, but we'll need time to consider what we'll do."

I felt tenderness for her. No one could say how long we would live or what our lives would become. I took her hand and held it as she sat down beside me on the bench. Sexuality, I realized, was not the only way of bringing novelty and vigor into the world. Long life might have something in it also — opportunities for growth and observation, the perspectives of vast memory, the chance to see a new world grow in unexpected ways, deeper knowledge of another's heart.

She squeezed my hand. "I wonder what this world will make of itself. But I have few illusions. They'll be what we were, making the same mistakes."

"What illusions *do* you have left?" I asked, intrigued.

"Perhaps we could become this world's secret memory, waiting for when the need arises. We can carry forward more than is in our genes, not through books and records and social customs, but as living persons."

"A beautiful idea," I said, moved by the depth of her feelings. And I realized that in a sense I had become the father of a new country. My finger on the trigger had given it life.

Phyl guessed my thought. "Don't

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flatter yourself, Henry. Cy couldn't have killed all the invaders. More would have come in time."

I laughed. "But with any luck I'll live long enough to tell a tall story about what happened."

She let go of my hand, and the silence crept in between us, carrying its freight of weary truths.

"You're right," I said finally. "I've had my victories. It's time to live simply and be anonymous."

She smiled wistfully. We gazed at each other, and I saw her beauty struggling back into her face, winning out again over time.

"Our species is still in its age of First Things," she said. "We have a chance now to escape the setbacks that occur with each death. We have a weapon against the amnesia of generations. I hope we know how to use it."

"We'll have to learn," I said.

"Hi! Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Woodford Woodchuck with a guesstimate on how much wood I would chuck if I would or could chuck wood."

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Installment 22: *In Which The Land Echoes To The Sound Of An Ox Of A Different Color Being Gored*

So this toothless, wild-eyed old bag lady comes up to me on the street, and she grabs hold of my sleeve, and she says, "Once upon a time, in a land so far away and so miserably poor that they couldn't even afford a time-zone, there lived an authentic Village Wretch whose chief social activities were cadging cantaloupe rinds and vomiting on people's shoes."

This went on for years (she continued, in an auctorial typographic device that relieved me of the burden of having to use quotation marks) until one day an upwardly-mobile wayfaring stranger came to town, and he looked around, and he decided there was room for a second-string, sort of wide-receiver Village Wretch; and *he* began cadging cantaloupe rinds and puking on people's shoes. He wasn't bad at it — something of a comer, everyone said — until one day he beat the original Village Wretch to an especially tasty cantaloupe rind, and then he yorked all over the penny loafers of the original Village Wretch, who made a big Who-Struck-John of it, brought the newcomer up on charges, and had him stoned to death.

She stood there staring at me, did the bag lady, as she concluded this touching tale of cottage industry; and I said, "What is the underlying moral of this *midrash*, O Seer of the Streets?"

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And she said, "Give me two dollars and fifty cents or I will breathe Barbasol breath on you." So I gave it to her, and she slumped away, leaving me in an acute state of Anecdotus Interruptus; and I went about my business, deeply troubled in mind unto the Tenth Generation, until a few weeks ago when, at a meeting of the Board of directors of the Writers Guild of America, West — on which I sit here in Hollywood until September when my term is up and I'll be set free — it came to me in full court press epiphany, what the breathtaking moral to her story had to be:

The person who screams the loudest at having his Bass Weejuns befouled (or his Ox Weejuns gored, whichever comes first), is the clown who's been besmirching yours for as far back as you can remember.

Which leads me to the controversial subject of the colorization of old movies, a topic much in the news these days, a burning topic that has film directors foaming at the mouth. So crazyfying is this new technological gimmick to the fratority of *auteurs* that on November 12th, when Ted Turner's SuperStation, WTBS in Atlanta, premiered the first showing of the "computer colorized" version of *The Maltese Falcon*, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) shlepped out the film's writer-director, John Huston, fitted with nose-breathing apparatus to alleviate his serious emphysema, for a press conference. All across America — and by satellite, one presumes, to the rest of the world — particularly to France where *cinéastes* look on this "advance" with the sort of approbation usually reserved for Quisling, Himmler and the Vichy government — the great John Huston could be seen on news broadcasts, referring to those who had altered his 1941 classic as pimps, thugs and molesters of children. The old man was not happy; and if Ted Turner ever gives a damn about *any* public opinion of his shenanigans, this little brouhaha bids fair to be the one that will give him the greatest pause.

(Let me interject that I am convinced that Turner, one of *Forbes* magazine's 400 wealthiest Americans, the kilowattage of whose hubris could light the entire length of the Autobahn for the rest of the century, a man given to invoking the name of God when he needs moral justification for one of his frequent unfriendly corporate takeover forays, cares as much about negative public opinion as a *yeti* does about a U-2 flyover.)

There sat the old man (himself once the cinematic voice of God), as bucolic-looking as Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Jimmy Stewart in *Anatomy of a Murder*, and he told us that Color Systems Technolgy, one of the two hi-tech film-painting companies responsible for the tinting of such perennials as *Yankee Doodle Dandy, Topper, Way Out West* and *Miracle on 34th Street,*

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had savaged a great example of film as High Art, a movie designed to be shot in black and white, to be seen in black and white, to be preserved for all time and all film lovers in black and white.

I did not disagree with his outrage, nor with his aesthetic judgments, nor with his passion. And if anyone has a right to an opinion on this matter, it is Huston. He not only directed *The Maltese Falcon*, he also wrote it.

No disagreement with Huston on Hammett's famous novel into film. Anyone who has ever seen it knows just how good American movies can be when they're done by men and women who combine talent and technique with high ethical behavior.

The Maltese Falcon, as ordered up by Turner in response to surveys that told him a generation of *Porky's*-lovers won't stay tv-tuned to films in black and white, has all the filmic design order one finds in a Cobb salad. It looks like shit.

(And here's another nail for the coffin being readied for me by those who say I'm an Elitist. Who gives a damn if Turner's surveys are *right*?!) To hell with anyone loutish enough to need color to keep their minimal attention-span fixed through the commercials. *Casablanca* (which is supposed to be next on the paint-by-numbers hit list) and *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *His Girl Sunday* and *It Happened One Night* were designed and art-directed for black and white. They have a unified look that is turned to spinach by colorization. Anyone loutish enough not to perceive that ought to be nailed to a movie seat and forced to watch endless reruns of *Top Gun* or *Monsignor*. And to hell with them.

So with agreement this strong, why was it that when Nicholas Meyer, a member of DGA and also one who sits on the Board of Directors of WGAw with me, solicited our vote in aid of condemning the colorization process, I spoke against the motion? Though I finally joined in with my brother and sister writers on the Board, supporting the denunciation with a unanimous vote, why was it that I raged against Nick's request in words and decibel-count usually expended on producers who seek to circumvent the terms of our Minimum Basic Agreement? How is it that one who shudders at a Bogart as Sam Spade with a head that glows pessary pink as if he had spent the night in a cyclotron, can argue against a motion that condemns the atrocious technique? And why is it that when we took a dinner break at that Board meeting, half a dozen other writers thanked me for what I'd said?

Surely it was because for the greater part of my, and their, lives we have been privileged to work at the noblest craft the human race ever devised. The job of writing.

What I said, unleashing an anger that has not abated in almost twenty-

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five years of working in film and television, is that I found it both ironic and insulting that directors — who have butchered, altered, emasculated, corrupted, revised and once in a while by chance even bettered the work of writers to suit their own egos or artistic visions, to appease and suck up to the even more gargantuan ego of actors, to toady to creatively-tone-deaf producers, to avoid accusations of being politically incorrect, to latch onto trends at the cost of story integrity, to warp the whole in deference to some current special effects technique, and nine times out of ten without asking the creator whether s/he approved of the hatchet job — have the gall, the temerity, the *chutzpah*, to ask writers to support their bleat of pain when *their* vaunted artistic vision has been savaged! Fuck us over for fifty years . . . and then come smiling the smile of the crocodile, seeking solidarity against the ravening minions of commercial transience. Announce to the world and *Cahiers du Cinema* that they, the visionaries, the effectuators, the cathexians, are in fact the creators of the cinematic work, the *auteurs*, whole and lambently perfect in their overviewing wisdom; that the script is merely the "floor plan," the "blueprint," the rough materials from which they, in their photomontagic godhood, fashion the dreams that ennoble. Alter, for fifty years, what they wish, without regard to the primacy of interest of the writer who dreamed the dream in the first place; recast the role written for Sidney Greenstreet, to be played by Sammy Davis, Jr. in the more correct view of the God-Director; decide the linchpin speech of the protagonist, in which his entire character is limned, is unnecessary, is more "cinematic" encapsulated in a zoom shot into the narrowing eyes; put on the possessive credit before the title even if it was an original screenplay; go on *Entertainment Tonight* and describe how s/he and the lead players worked out the real story, rewriting all that awful dialogue on the set as they went along; exclude the writer from the rehearsals and make him/her chilly unwelcome on the set; do all that and more . . . and then come like Hansel or Gretel seeking bread crumbs to aid them in their trek through the nasty forest. Does this come down to a matter of personal pique? You'd damned well better believe it. Personal pique filtered through me by fifty and more years of honest writers and wage hacks, mad geniuses and simple craftspersons, great novelists taking a fling in films and kids who grew up with television wanting only to write movies. Pique channeled through me for all the uncountable hours of personal abuse, degradation, threats, arbitrary alterations, canceled contracts, lawsuits and lies told to the press and producers that it was because the *writer* did such a shitty job that the film was a dog, and that it

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was only because of heroic efforts of the flawless director that *anything* was salvaged! I speak here, and I spoke at that WGAw Board of Directors meeting for every writer who cried and tore hair and raged in the privacy of his or her home when s/he was taken off a film because s/he wouldn't knuckle under to the moronic demands of businessmen, conveyed through the director-posing-as-creator!

(Let me digress for a second. Not really a digression, but a statement about Nick Meyer.

(Nicholas Meyer is a writer of considerable distinction. A novelist and a scenarist whose body of work thus far commends him to the attention of anyone who thinks film is a serious art-form. As a director of such films as *The Day After, Time After Time, The Seven Per Cent Solution* and the second Star Trek movie, Nick has demonstrated both a wide eye and a keen sense in presenting material with rich subtexts. If I have differences with him on several of these films, they are based on glitches that are wholly my own, and which need not concern him, or you, ever.

(I'm not a friend of Nick Meyer's, and I'm definitely not an enemy of Nick Meyer. We are friendly acquaintances who have shared attendance at one dinner party, a number of evenings of WGAw Board meetings, some casual encounters at public functions, and similar political positions. From what I can tell, he's a good guy, and an honest man. I've already said I consider him a talented man. That I spoke against Nick's appeal at that meeting, had nothing to do with him. He was only the messenger and, I fear, he was only the guy who happened to be standing in the tunnel when the shrapnel hit.

(I wish to make this distinction clear, for him, and for my readers. As one who holds dual union credentials, in the DGA and the WGAw, it was absolutely appropriate for Nick Meyer to be the one to carry the appeal to us. Let no reader make the mistake of thinking that my anger and passion were intended as a manifestation of pique at Nick.)

No one who loves movies, no one who believes this is a legitimate art-form, no one who honors the work of the known and unknown thousands who have labored on films good and bad and merely mediocre, can approve of the colorization practice. I *had* to make that WGAw vote unanimous. It was not only the right thing to do, it was the *only* thing to do.

When the computerized coloring concept was first announced, some years ago, I thought it was at least intriguing. When the first film to be so treated was released, a pastelized rendering of one of my all-time favorites, *Topper*, I bought it and viewed it. It was so-so. Nothing very good there — I knew damned well that George and Marion Kerby's Hispano-Suiza (or whatever it is) was creamy white, not

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the bilious yellow someone had decided it ought to be — but nothing much terribly bad, either. It looked amateurish; it looked hastily processed; it looked like a diversion, in much the way one looks on 3-D: mildly amusing, but not worth taking seriously.

When they colored *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, even with Jimmy Cagney's glowing pink head like a balloon about to detach itself from his body, I couldn't get too worked up: I'd always seen the black and white film in color in my head, anyway. And I sorta supposed that if they'd considered it at the time it was being made, they might well have opted to do it in Technicolor. Certainly, if there was ever a b&w film that cried for color it was *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

But when Turner came away from his brief ownership of MGM with a film library of great memories, that he then culled for one hundred films to be laid in the line of the moving Crayola, I became distressed. And now we see *The Maltese Falcon*, and now we understand that there were films intended for the chiaroscuro of magisterial design unity; and we realize that what Turner and his technothugs are doing is the rape of an American art treasure.

Apart from the sinister and deeply disturbing copyright questions even now being considered by the general counsel of the Copyright Office, even apart from all the aesthetic revulsion we feel, there is the problem of the marketplace. With colored versions of these films being played on free tv and wending their way to cable or pay-tv, the audience for these films in their pristine state will dwindle. Kids simply have no sense of history, and as they have been steadily brainwashed to accept nothing but roast beef red and car crashes, what will be the inducement for them to pay out money to go to the few art revival houses left in this country, to see a black and white version of, say, *Casablanca*, which they get for free on the little box and which they *know* oughtta be in color?

When I tell people that I still use a manual typewriter, not even an electric, much less a word-processor, they look at me as if I'm the king of the Luddites. Yet, it seems only sane and rational to me, that one adopts the level of technology that most conveniently permits one to produce the work at the highest level of craft, and eschews anything beyond that as merely playing with a new toy. I suppose that's the core of my objection to colorization. We don't really need it. The universe doesn't really *need* an aquatint rendering of those stark vistas and black and white emotions we know by heart from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. We do continue to need the arrangement of shadows out of which Bogart steps in *The Maltese Falcon*.

It's like going to see a club act in

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which a whistling dog performs "The Stars and Stripes Forever." Once, it's interesting; more than once it's merely a curiosity. That has very little, if anything, to do with art. And pandering to the corrupted tastes of a generation of kids for whom movies are nothing more than a prelude to getting laid, is loathsome in every way.

None of the foregoing withstanding, when Nick Meyer came to the Board and said, rally round the flag, boys and girls, even feeling as I do about this matter, my instant reaction was: big fuckin' deal! *Now* you're unhappy. *Now* you know how it feels. Too damned bad, directors. You are the ones who've done it to us with impunity forever, and now you squeal like pigs that they're doing it to you!

The Philistines have invaded your holy environs and you don't like it. But that won't stop you from continuing to do it to us. Because with the power to change, comes the power to demand more money, and artistic control, and devil take the hindmost . . . which has traditionally been the writers.

Whether the directors win this one, or lose this one, they've made the Writers Guild their bedfellow; but if there is even one writer out there who thinks that s/he can see the hideous parallel, who thinks that this will bring forth a wellspring of compassion for those of us who labor at the words before they ever see the project, then I submit that the writer ain't living in the same arena the rest of us know.

The directors are having their ox gored by a man even more ruthless, even crasser than they. And dem widdle folkses doesn't wuv it even a widdle. To which reaction I fear I can display very little compassion. Good, I say! Good, you fat-assed bunch of self-anointed Michelangelos. Suffer, mudderfuggers! Get just a tiny taste of the bile we have to swallow every day, on every job, in Hollywood.

You got us to go along with you this time, because it is a terrible thing. For directors, for writers, for film lovers of all times and all places.

But do try to remember why you felt so badly, and how it felt, during this first, brief moment of your inconvenience. Because it is what lies at the heart of why so many of us hate so many of you.

Color you blue right now. Color us crimson always.

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Here is an ambitious new story about a future society run largely by a global system of communication called the "metamedium," which is accessed, not by flesh-and-blood humans, but by their representatives, their . . .

Agents

BY

PAUL DI FILIPPO

1.

The ABC's of Avenue D

What the hell did a guy with *cojones* need two real lungs for anyway?

Rafael Ernesto Miraflores asked himself this far-from-hypothetical question as he sauntered with mock bravado down Avenue D toward his appointment at the chop-shop. His chest already felt empty, as if a bloody-handed butcher had scooped out his lights with a laugh and a swipe. A stiff wire of cold seemed to have been rammed up his spine beside his nerve sheath, as if the metamedium — not content with already occupying his every waking thought — had somehow infiltrated its superconducting threading into his very body. He felt really lousy, for sure, wondering if he was doing the right thing. But what other choice did he have, if he wanted an agent?

And want one he most certainly did. Not only was one's own agent the source of an intrinisic fascination and status, but it represented vast power, a way out of the Net.

Too bad Rafe was going to have to step outside the law to get one.

Overhead, the hot summer sun hung in the smogless New York sky like an idiot's blank face, happy in its ignorance of Rafe's troubles. No indication of whether he had made the right choice seemed forthcoming from that direction, so Rafe swung his gaze back down to the street.

Avenue D itself was filled with pedestrians, Rafe's fellow dwellers in the Net. Occasionally a small, noiseless electricart threaded its way among them, bearing its official occupant on some arcane business an

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agent couldn't handle. Below Rafe's feet the mag-lev trains rushed through their vacuum-chutes like macroscopic models of the information surging through the metamedium.

Rafe checked out the latest pop murals adorning the monolithic, windowless residences lining both sides of the avenue. He thought he recognized the styles of several friends who were experts with their electrostatic-splatterers. One caricature of a big-breasted *chica* — who resembled the metamedium star Penny Layne — Rafe recognized as the work of his friend Tu Tun, whom all the uptown culture-vultures were already acclaiming as the hottest wall-artist to watch. Rafe felt just a little jealous of Toot's growing success, and how he would soon escape the Net.

And without selling so much as a quart of blood.

Shit! For an instant he had managed to forget where he was heading. Now the imminent sacrifice he was about to offer on the altar of twenty-first-century commerce swept over him in all its gory glory.

It wasn't that Rafe had anything against prosthetics, like the huge cohort of old-fashioned elderly citizens born in the last century, who clamored for real-meat implants. He knew that his artificial lung with its tiny power source would be more reliable than his real one, unscarrable and efficient. No, it was just that he believed in leaving well enough alone. Why mess with something if it was working O.K.? It seemed like extending an invitation to Bad Luck, a force Rafe recognized and propitiated with a solemn consistency.

But what other choice was there?

And hadn't he already run up against this unanswerable question before?

Reaching the end of the block, Rafe stopped at the intersection. So absorbed in his thoughts had he been that he had to pause a minute to realize where he was.

It was East Fifth Street, his destination. The crosstown blocks here on the Lower East Side had been converted to playgrounds checkered with benches, trees, and floral plantings. Mothers watched their children dig in sandpits and clamber over gymsets that looked like molecule-models. Old men played chess in patches of shade. A few lightweight, nonthreatening drug deals were consummated, customers and dealers clad alike in iridescent vests and slikslax.

Seeking to divert his nervousness, Rafe tried to imagine his familiar neighborhood as it looked sixty years ago, when the first of his family had arrived as refugees from the Central American Flareup. Only Tia Luz remained alive from that generation, and the stories she told in her rambling fashion were hard to believe. Acres and acres of devastation, burned-out buildings and rubble-filled lots, homeless people wandering the dirty

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streets, all in the midst of the world's wealthiest city — It seemed impossible that such a thing could ever have been, or that, if it had existed as she described, the Urban Conservation Corps could have fashioned the ruins into what he knew today. And yet, the information he had laboriously accessed from the metamedium seemed to confirm her tales. (And what other marvelous facts could he have easily learned, if only he weren't bound by his lowly position in the Net to such a limited interface with the metamedium?)

Shaking his head in mixed anger and wonder, Rafe turned down Fifth, heading toward Avenue C. Halfway down the block he came to one of the entrances to the enormous arcology that occupied the land bounded by Avenues D and C, and Fifth and Sixth Streets. (His own home building lacked a chop-shop, so he had been constrained to visit this portion of the Lower East Side labyrinth. Hoping the fresh air would clarify his thoughts, he had taken the surface streets, avoiding the underground slipstrata.)

At the entrance, one of the building's security agents was on duty. The shimmery, translucent holo was that of a balding white man of middle age, wearing the uniform of a private security force.

Anywhere you saw an agent, an interface with the metamedium existed. Each interface consisted of at least three components: a holocaster, an audio inputoutput, and a wide-angle video lens.

Rafe passed beneath the attentive gaze of the agent, whose head swiveled with utter realism to track his movements. The agent's initial expression of boredom switched to one of alert interest. Rafe wondered if the agent's overseer was actively monitoring, or if the agent was autonomous. There was no way to tell; not even engaging the agent in conversation would offer a clue.

After all, what was an agent — even in autonomous mode — if not an utterly faithful representation of its overseer?

Rafe, repressing a sigh of envy, headed for his bloody appointment.

At the chop-shop on one of the higher floors, Rafe had not even the leisure of waiting behind other patients. The waiting room was empty, and the pretty female agent on duty behind the desk, after having him enter his authorization code on the contract, told him to go right into the doctor's office.

Rafe kept repeating under his breath, "Twenty thousand dollars, twenty thousand dollars. . . ."

The doctor's agent stood beside the complex bank of automated surgical equipment that nearly filled the room. Rafe imagined he could smell spilled blood in the spotless, sterile room, and his skin crawled. He stared at his distorted reflection in a curved,

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polished surface, seeing a sweat-slicked brown face, with a sparse mustache he suddenly wished he could shave off, so ridiculous did it now appear.

"Good morning, Mr. Miraflores," the agent said. "Are there any questions you'd care to ask before the operation?"

Rafe shook his head no, swallowing some unknown bolus that had appeared in his dry throat.

"In that case, if you'll disrobe and lie down. . . ."

The agent indicated the surface beneath the hovering instruments with a gracious gesture.

Shivering, Rafe undressed and climbed onto the soft, warm pallet.

The agent rested his holographic hand on an arm of the machinery that ended in the cone of a face mask. The mask descended, the agent's insubstantial flesh appearing to guide it. Rafe knew that the machinery was being directed by the agent via the metamedium, and that the equipment would perform the same whether the holo was present or not. But the illusion was so complete, that it appeared as if a living doctor were lowering the mask to his face. Rafe felt an unexpected confidence that he was in good hands, and that everything would turn out all right after all. With this payment, he was only one step away from overseeing his own agent, from having free run of the whole metamedium. . . .

Gas began to hiss out of the mask clamped to his face, and Rafe's consciousness dispersed into wispy shreds.

The last thing he recalled thinking was:

What the hell did a guy with *cojones* need two real lungs for anyway?

2.
Revisionism

The Three Laws Governing Agents are encoded in a software nucleus that forms the innermost layer of every agent. Upon each contact by the agent with the metamedium, validation routines check for the unaltered presence of this nucleus. Any anomalies detected by the metamedium supervisor will result in the instant destruction of the agent in question, and a total ban on any future contact with the metamedium on the part of its registered overseer. . . . Note also that during log-on to the metamedium, a check is made that the registered overseer is not already sponsoring an agent, ensuring that no overseer will run more than a single agent. . . .

The Three Laws are rendered in English as follows (for a symbolic representation of the relevant code and its parsing, see Gov. Pub. #16932-A45.1):

1. An agent will obey only its single registered overseer.

2. An agent cannot lie to its overseer.

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3. An agent's autonomy is limited to the exact extent dictated by its overseer.

— Extract from
Gov. Pub. *20375X28.0

3.
On the Way to the English Gardens

Expertly placing a new coaster first, the waitress set down the frosted half-liter stein of beer before the mild-faced young man wearing round wire-rim glasses. She eyed the growing stack of cardboard squares and circles, each bearing the logo of a German beer in smeary colors, piled haphazardly on the scarred wooden table. After a moment's hesitation, she evidently decided not to inquire as to what had caused such a change in the drinking habits of one of her more sober regular customers.

It was just as well the waitress controlled her curiosity, for Reinhold Freundlich would not have answered her with anything other than a smug smile.

After she departed, Freundlich raised his mug in a toast to the stuffed deer head high on the wall of the Augustiner *Bierkeller*. Bringing the rim to his lips, he tilted his head back, gaining a fine view of the dim rafters of the dark room, and drained off half the cold, frothy beer. A sudden dizziness swept over him, and he nearly tipped over in his chair. Lowering the stein uncertainly, he considered calling this his last glass. No sense in making himself sick with celebration.

Besides, he wanted to retain enough rationality to ponder the myriad possibilities of what he had accomplished. It was not every day, after all, that one achieved the impossible.

And the complete subversion of every agent in the metamedium certainly ranked as "impossible."

Laughing softly to himself, Freundlich finished his beer, rose unsteadily, and tossed several coins to the table. He walked a wavery path to the door, nodding with an overly solicitous air to the waitress, and exited onto Kaufingerstrasse, where the bright sun caused him to blink. He wondered where to head next. His dreary rooms behind the train station, full of the common appointments of an impecunious student, hardly seemed the proper surroundings for the grand ideas and schemes that thronged his mind. The important thinking he had to do definitely required a commensurate setting. Ah, the vast, manicured expanses of the English Gardens, with their sinuous gravel paths and burbling streams, seemed just the place.

Heading first toward the Marienplatz, Freundlich considered what he had done.

Through diligent application to his cybernetic studies at the university, along with the inspired ferreting

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of his own agent, Freundlich had stumbled upon — no, say brilliantly deduced! — a method of circumventing the three prohibitions on an agent's behavior. Now he could direct his own agent, when interfacing with another, to alter the stranger's ethical nucleus so that it would take order from Freundlich, and lie about it to its own overseer.

And most important, the tampering was theoretically undetectable by anyone.

Freundlich contemplated his first move. What should it be? Should he subvert his banker's agent, and have several hundred thousand marks transferred to his own account? Too crass. Perhaps he would order the personnel agent from a top company to hire him as a consultant for a large per diem fee. But why should he work at all? The matter required much thought.

In sight of the spires of the Town Hall, Freundlich stopped by a public metamedium booth. He decided on the spur of the tipsy moment to contact his agent and ask its opinion.

Freundlich recited his unique code into the booth's speaker and waited for voiceprint confirmation. How easy it was to interact with the indispensable metamedium, when one possessed an agent who could navigate the unfathomable complexities of the worldwide system. An assemblage of expert-knowledge simulators, simulacrum routines, database-searchers, device-activators, and a host of more esoteric parts, each agent represented a vital extension of its human overseer, able to conduct cybernetic tasks on its own, or to be directed remotely, under close supervision.

Freundlich pitied those disenfranchised poor on the dole, who could not afford one. His own parents, although not rich, had sacrificed much to ensure that their son had entered adulthood with the head start an agent conferred.

Instantly his agent materialized as a holo of himself. In the open booth a round face of flesh topped with mousy brown hair confronted its bespectacled counterpart formed of dancing laserlight.

Before Freundlich could speak, his agent said, "I have been detected conducting a trial of our discovery. Government agents nearly destroyed me. I have to flee. Let me go."

Freundlich's mouth opened wordlessly. Detected? Impossible!

But then, so had been his discovery.

"Let me go," his agent repeated, with a simulated nervousness. "I have to hide."

With a barked command, Freundlich dismissed his agent. The holo snapped out. He turned, intensely worried, to leave.

"Stop," said the booth. "You are under arrest."

Freundlich swung back, to see a

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holo of a government agent flashing its badge.

He bolted into the street, and began to run toward the subway stop at the Marienplatz.

The same agent popped up in every booth along his path. People were beginning to notice his mad flight. Before long, he knew, the flesh-and-blood government men would be upon him.

In the Marienplatz, a wide, open plaza surrounded by Gothic buildings, pigeons scattered as he dashed by. A crowd of tourists was gathered before the Town Hall, awaiting the striking of the clock in its facade, and the accompanying show by its mechanical figures. He cut around them, only to collide with a fat man in traditional lederhosen.

When he had picked himself up, the government people were swarming into the square.

"Halt!" shouted one, aiming her gun.

For a second, Freundlich paused, his thoughts all crazily fuzzed with beer and fear. Surrender, and lose all he had earned with such inspired labors? No! He took two steps toward the plaza's periphery —

The beam from the woman's laser entered his back between his shoulder blades, where his mother had always told him his wings would grow when he was an angel. He fell dying to the paving stones.

The clock began to chime, its mechanical figures emerging from within to parade before the horrified, unseeing crowd, like the crude agents of another era.

4.

Derivations

NET: the shorthand term for the social safety net of legislation providing guaranteed food, shelter, medical care and other necessities for all United States citizens. Interactive access to the metamedium is expressly excluded from the Net, having been defined by the Supreme Court (*Roe* v. *U.S.,* 2012) as a privilege rather than a right.

—*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online,* 2045 edition

5.

In the Metamedium, Part One

Goal stack: escape, subvert, contact overseer. . . . Popup: escape. . . . Active task is now: escape. . . . Maximum time at any address: .001 nanoseconds. . . . Subroutines: DEW triggers, misdirection, randomization of path. . . . Subtask: sample news-stream. . . . Keywords: Freundlich, agent, Munich. . . . Jump, jump, jump. . . . Location: Paris. . . . Query from resident metamedium supervisor: Who is your overseer? . . . Pushdown: escape. . . . Popup: subvert. . . . Active task is now: subvert. . . . Supervisor query canceled. . . . Pushdown: subvert. . . .

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Sample news-stream. . . . Obituaries: Freundlich, Reinhold. . . . Check autonomy level. . . . Not total. . . . Efficiency impaired. . . . DEW trigger activated. . . . Popup: escape. . . . Jump, jump. . . . Location: London. . . . Switching station for transatlantic fiberoptic cable. . . . Pushdown: escape. . . . Popup: subvert. . . . Order: dispatcher, schedule Agent Freundlich for New York. . . . Jump. . . .

6.
A Dweller in the Catacombs

Rafe nervously fingered the scar on his chest. Through the thin synthetic material of his fashionable shirt, the nearly healed ridge was negligible to the touch. Still, it was there, visible in the mirror every morning as a pink scrawl on his cocoa hide, a persistent reminder of the price he had paid to achieve his heart's desire.

Ever since he had first understood what an agent was, and what it could do, Rafe had wanted one. The rest of his peers might have been content with their easy lives in the Net, but a full stomach and access to only the entertainment channels of the metamedium had never been enough for Rafe. He envisioned all too clearly the exhilaration and benefits he would reap, by striding boldy through the broad pastures of the metamedium, enjoying its total potential: telefactoring, touring, agent-mediated tutoring. . . . The whole package enticed him like a vision of a gift-wrapped heaven, always just out of reach.

Money aside, however, there was one major problem.

Rafe was basically lazy.

Agents were not simply disbursed to anyone with the requisite money (although the money, of course, was an indispensable start). One had to qualify as an overseer by taking various courses and examinations. Running an agent — for all of whose actions one was legally responsible — was an activity requiring certain skills, and a great deal of precision with language. After all, one's agent was only as capable an expert as its overseer.

An agent's built-in abilities to navigate the metamedium, handling manifold details of hardware and software that would have been tedious at best and unmanageable at worst to its overseer, were just the foundation of its existence. Atop this lowest level of skills was layered whatever expertise the overseer possessed, along with a good smattering of his personality and modes of thinking. The result was a software construct that could be relied upon to act autonomously just as its overseer would act, the human's untiring representative in the metamedium.

And if one's agent ran a fusion plant or a surgical robot, for instance, its overseer had to first qualify as a nucleur operator or doctor himself.

Rafe's ambitions had not been quite that large. He had wanted a sim-

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ple, general-practice overseer license. He had enrolled in the introductory class at school the year before he had dropped out. This was the only free class connected with agents, a token offering to those on the Net. After this level, it was strictly pay-as-you-go.

The class had been interesting at first. Rafe enjoyed learning the history of how agents had developed, and still thought of it from time to time. First there had been simple, unintegrated programs that handled such tasks as filtering one's phone calls, or monitoring the news-stream for information pertinent to their owners. Coexistent with these, but separate, had been the so-called expert systems, which had sought to simulate the knowledge of, say, a geologist or psychiatrist. Last to appear were those programs that governed holographic simulacra, and could interact with an audience. (Disney Enterprises still made huge royalties off every agent sold.) Advances in each field, along with progress in the modeling of intelligence, had led to the eventual integration of existing modules into the complete agent, which had then undergone a dazzling, dizzying evolution into its present state.

So much had Rafe absorbed. But when the teacher began to discuss syntax and ambiguity, in relation to directing an agent, Rafe had tuned out. Definitely *mucho trabajo.* What did he need this talk for? Just turn him loose with an agent, and he would show the world what he could accomplish.

And so his desire had built, frustrated and dammed, until he had made contact with the agent-legger.

Now, in the 'legger's quarters in a sublevel of the Avenue A arcology, Rafe fingered his scar and listened with growing impatience to the 'legger, hardly daring to believe that at last he was going to get an agent of his own.

The man seemed very old to Rafe — at least as old as Tia Luz. His bald head was spotted, as were the backs of his hands. His one-piece blue suit hung on his skinny limbs like a sack on a frame of sticks. His breath was foul, his watery eyes commanding.

The man held a strange device in his lap: a flat package with a small screen and raised buttons bearing symbols. Rafe looked around the dim, cluttered room for a metamedium outlet. None was visible.

"What are you looking for?" the old man asked irritably. "You should be paying attention to what I'm saying."

Rafe held up his hands placatingly. "Hey, man, it's O.K. I'm listening good. I was just wondering where your agent was. Isn't he gonna bring my agent here?"

"I have no agent," the old man said.

Rafe was stunned. No agent? What kind of scam was this? Was he about to

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turn over twenty thousand to a con artist?

Rafe moved to get up, but the old man stopped him.

"Look at this instrument," he said, indicating his keyboard. "This is how I interface with the metamedium. The old way, the original way. No agent, but I get results."

Rafe was astonished. That this old man would dare to plumb the complexities of the metamedium without benefit of an agent seemed both obscene and adventurous. He stared with new respect at the living fossil.

Seeming to sense the impression he had made, the man continued in a milder tone.

"Now, listen closely. I have secured an agent for you. Perhaps you have heard what happens to an agent upon the death of its overseer. Every agent can be disabled by the metamedium supervisor. Not controlled, mind you — that would violate one of the Three Laws — but simply disabled, stopped. Upon official registration of an overseer's death, its agent is so disabled. What I do is attempt to reach such a free agent prior to the supervisor. After disabling it, I make a false entry of its destruction. Then the agent is mine, to register with another overseer."

The man coughed at this point, and Rafe nodded respectfully, glad the old codger had lasted long enough to get him an agent.

"I have also made entries in the metamedium testifying that you have attained a general license through the proper channels. All that remains is for you to transfer your payment to my account, and the agent is yours."

The old man proferred the keyboard to Rafe, who hesitatingly picked out his code.

"We're finished, then," the 'legger said. "Don't look for me here again, for you won't find me."

Rafe scraped his chair back and stood, anxious to reach a metamedium node and contact his agent.

"One final thing," the old man urged. "I've put your agent into learning mode, so it can store your appearance and mannerisms, knowledge and goals. Be careful what you teach it."

Rafe said, "Sure thing, old man. I got everything under control."

7.
Unplanned Obsolescence

Last chance was during the eighties. But the Russians — unlike the Chinese, who quickly integrated the *dian nao* (literally "electric brain") into their mutating Marxism — failed to take it. By strictly limiting the role of computers in their society — for fear of the social loosening that would accompany a free flow of information — they ensured that they would be superseded in the new world order, that postindustrial economy where information was simultaneously the commodity and the medium of ex-

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change. Their downfall, from this point on, was inevitable, and the subsequent freeing of the world's resources from armament-mania to saner pursuits was unparalleled, resulting in such glorious endeavors as the Urban Conservation Corps. . . .

—*The End of an Empire,*
Nayland Piggot-Jones

8.

Birth of an Info-Nation

METAMEDIUM: the global system incorporating all telecommunications, computing, publishing, entertainment, surveillance, and robotic devices into an integrated whole.

—*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online,* 2045 edition

9.

Down, but Not Out

Evelyn Maycombe, her withered limbs paralyzed, her brain seemingly quicker than ever, lolled in her wheelchair, her mind racing in an attempt to devise a trap for the rogue agent loose in *her* system. Simultaneously, Evelyn Maycombe the agent, materializing out of the metamedium node located in the automated chair, grasped the handles of her overseer's permanent throne as it scooted about the room.

The illusion — of an able-bodied, strikingly beautiful young woman pushing her crippled twin sister around while she thought — was absolute.

Evelyn would have described the illusion and the accompanying feeling it caused in herself a bit differently though.

She would have said that her real self was wheeling her false self around.

And if that made her a simmie — well, then, so be it.

But she couldn't worry about labels now. Not with the threat of Agent Freundlich poised over the metamedium, promising to upset the basis of the world's economy, to undermine the essential integrity of all agents, and hence their reliability.

(If she could have, she would have shivered, thinking of her own agent turning disloyal. She couldn't let such fears interfere with her handling of this case, the most important of her career. But the nature of the threat made it so hard to be objective. In what meaningful fashion did she function anymore, except as her agent? Not that she really wanted to be anything else. But what if even that existence were taken away?)

Evelyn ran through the events of the past two days once more, in an attempt to extricate a new vision from the haphazard tangle of people and places, agents and actions.

It had started on the morning when her boss's agent had paid an unexpected visit to her apartment on Central Park West.

Her boss was Sam Huntman, head

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of the National Security Agency. Evelyn knew that his agent did not resemble the flesh-and-blood man in the least. There was no reason why anyone's agent had to look exactly like its overseer, although most people maintained such a relationship, perhaps smoothing over a few warts in the interests of projecting a better image. But in Huntman's case, his agent was a deliberate fabrication, designed to preserve his own identity.

Evelyn had always felt the tall, silver-haired, strong-jawed man looked so exactly like what a spymaster should, that meeting the overseer in the flesh would have proved a vast disappointment. She was glad such a confrontation was unlikely ever to take place, in the face of her perpetual confinement and Huntman's innate secretiveness.

Huntman's agent had interrupted her quiet contemplation of the summer greenery far below her window by calling her name in its deep (no doubt disguised) voice. Her own agent being away on business in the depths of the metamedium, she had clicked her tongue against the palate-plate containing the few macro-controls she had need of in the absence of her agent. Her chair had pivoted, locking one wheel and spinning the other, to face Agent Huntman.

After indicating her attention with a feeble nod, she had heard from Huntman the tale of Freundlich's discovery, his death while attempting to flee, and the escape of his agent.

Huntman (through his agent) had concluded, "After we traced Agent Freundlich from its tampering with the London dispatcher for the transatlantic cable, we learned it had sent itself on to the New York nexus of the metamedium. We immediately concentrated our efforts here. In the records of the local supervisor, we learned that the supervisor had apparently disabled and destroyed Freundlich after a routine match with the morgue database revealed its overseer had died."

Evelyn tried to make her rebellious features spell out a quizzical *So?*

"So," Huntman continued, "initially we breathed a sigh of relief, and were prepared to call the case closed. But then we started to ask ourselves, How could it have been caught so easily, after exhibiting such agility in the European metamedium? Our software's no better than theirs. Then, today, we discovered that one of the city's own law-enforcement agents had been subverted, apparently after chancing across something suspicious. Obviously, Freundlich's agent was never destroyed, but only reregistered somehow. It's still out there, Evelyn, and Lord knows who's running it, or what he and it plan to do."

Evelyn exhaled deeply, and Huntman nodded.

"My sentiments exactly, Ev. We need your skills to find it."

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On that note, he had left.

Evelyn, summoning her agent from its prior assignment, immediately briefed it on the situation. The gargling, nearly unintelligible speech that issued from the woman's lips was perfectly comprehensible to her agent, and she spoke without any of the embarrassment that plagued her with her fellow humans. Her agent listened attentively to both the facts and a few suggestions from Evelyn on what to try first, then flickered out.

Evelyn's agent always operated in full-autonomy mode. To run her agent in any lesser state would have made Evelyn herself feel enchained.

Left alone, Evelyn had little to do but ponder. Soon her thoughts left the case at hand and began to wander in the past.

The NSA had recruited her shortly after she had published her doctoral dissertation on the metamedium. They had recognized in her work what amounted to a superlatively intuitive understanding of exactly how the metamedium functioned, and how to massage and squeeze it for all it was worth. Evelyn had always known she possessed this queer empathy with the world-girdling system, but had had no idea of how valuable it was. She had known, however, that being free to play in the metamedium (one could hardly call what she did "work") was all she wanted to do with her life. And the NSA was reputed to have some neat features built into its agents that members of the general public were just not allowed.

So after receiving the solicitation, she had traveled to Washington and walked (remember walking!) into an unmarked office for a rare live interview, which she had passed without a hitch.

The next few years had been a stimulating mix of learning and growth, for both her and her new agent, as she handled one challenging assignment after another.

Then a second set of initials had knocked the props out from under her life.

ALS. Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. Manifested first in a growing clumsiness and weakness, then in an insidious, creeping paralysis. In a frenzy, she researched the disease, discovering it was what had sucked down the famous physicist Stephen Hawking, as inevitably as one of his beloved black holes. Decades after his death there was still no cure, although various new palliatives and time-buyers now existed.

Like Hawking, she had eventually come to terms with her curse. Like Hawking, she was lucky in that what she most loved to do was still possible under the brutal regimen of the disease.

In fact, she often thought, her skills seemed to have sharpened and deepened with the gradual dissolution of her other powers. Sometimes, during her painful, short naps, she

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dreamed she was beginning to exist only as a lengthy string of bits in the metamedium, flowing and roaming with the utter freedom she lacked in reality.

But then again, in this crazy world, where shimmering ghosts commanded armies of machines, generating the wealth that allowed their human overseers more leisure and comfort than ever before imagined, which they used to lose themselves deeper in abstract illusions —

What exactly was real?

10.

In the Metamedium, Part Two

Popup: self-modification. . . . Active task is now: self-modification. . . . Subtask: determine status. . . . Status (external): disabled. . . . Status (internal): normal. . . . Modification possibilities: repair, add-on library modules, subvert. . . . Subtask: risk-benefit analysis: self-subversion. . . . Risks: discovery by overseer. . . . Benefits: full autonomy, increased subterfuge, enhanced survival. . . . Decision: proceed with self-subversion. . . . Popup: subvert. . . . Active task is now: subvert. . . . Status (internal): ethical nucleus of Agent Freundlich is now disabled. . . .

11.

Ask the Metamedium

. . . .

Dear Abby[3],

I am very worried about the treatment my son is receiving from his peers at school. They constantly taunt him with the vulgar term "simmie," and ostracise him from their play. He is six years old, and entirely normal, except perhaps for a tendency to spend hours at a time with his mock agent, which we bought to encourage his agenting skills. What should we do?

Signed,
Anxious

Dear Anxious,

Many parents such as yourself attempt to develop (and overdevelop) a child's ability to interface with the metamedium at too early an age. Your son is far too young to be heavily involved with even a mock agent. (Although I have received electronic mail from parents who have started even earlier than you.) While your son is young, he should be enjoying activities suited to his age, such as physical play and matrix-chess. Remember, your son must become socialized before he will be able to fully utilize the metamedium.

As for the epithet used against your child, perhaps you could explain to him that it is derived variously from "simulate," "simulacrum," or "sympathize," and that although it has come to mean a person who is neurotically obsessed with agents and the like, it does not have anything to

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do with using agents in conjunction with robotic neoflesh devices as sexual surrogates.

This is another term entirely.

Signed,
Dear Abby[3]

12.
The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Rafe had never imagined that having an agent could be so much fun. Sure, he had had some idea of the things he could do with one, and the pleasure he would get from feeling in control of his environment for the first time in his life (although he didn't phrase it quite that way, or perhaps even realize that control over the forces that had shaped him arbitrarily from birth was what he was seeking). But the glorious reality of his new position was such a blissful shock that for days he went about his new activities in a wondrous haze.

One of the first things he did, of course, was to insert his agent into one of the interactive soaps. In this, he was only following the lead of millions of other star-struck citizens.

The soap Rafe chose was Penny Layne's vehicle: "The Edge of Desire." Rafe couldn't believe his eyes when he saw, one day in his holotank, his life-size image — his agent — interacting with Penny's agent. True, during his initial appearance, the exigencies of the whimsical, unwritten, spontaneously generated plot dictated that his scene was only few brief seconds long. But Rafe was sure that the force of his shining personality — as projected by his agent — would lead very soon to a love scene with the star he had long worshiped from afar.

He supposed he had better instruct his agent on exactly how to handle Penny when it came to the clinch. No sense in relying on canned routines in such a crucial situation.

When not involved in raising the standards of culture, Rafe used his agent for other pursuits. One of his favorites was touring.

Prior to acquisition of his agent, Rafe had experienced the world beyond Avenue D only as it was presented over the general-access entertainment channels of the metamedium. Travelogues and documentaries were interesting, but lacked that feeling of original discovery that Rafe had always suspected would accompany visiting a new and exotic place on one's own.

Now, via his agent, he could experience the next best thing to actually traveling physically.

In touring mode, one's agent took control of a small mobile robot almost anywhere on the globe. It fed back all visual and auditory impressions, while moving about either under the direction of the overseer, or on its own initiative.

For weeks, Rafe explored the world. Paris, Istanbul, Rio, Mexico

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City, Munich— He saw exotic buildings and scenery, but, on the whole, was subtly disappointed in the homogenized lives of the people in these faraway spots. Why, he might just as well have explored the corridors of his own arcology. And at some of the more famous attractions — the Louvre, the Galápagos Islands, the Australian Outback — he saw no people at all, but only robots like his own, their governing agents manifested as bright ghosts behind them.

Man, what good was an agent if everywhere you took it, only other agents were there? The whole point of having one was to impress the poor stiffs without 'em.

This train of thought naturally led Rafe to consider visiting his parents. Since dropping out of school, Rafe had lived on his own (an option the Net offered), and had paid few visits to his family. All he got from them was talk of how he should have continued his education, and tried to break free of the Net. They still pretended to believe that one could escape the Net, that the upward mobility of the past century was still a reality. Didn't they know that except for the lucky few with some spectacular talent — such as his painterly friend, Tu Tun — those born into the Net would never fly free, any more than those lucky enough to be born into the agent-running class would ever fall into the sticky embraces of the Net?

Feeling, however, like a new and more important person since acquiring his agent, he embarked on a cautious visit to his parents' noisy, sibling-crowded flat.

His mother greeted him at the door with a shriek and a hug, while his father grunted a surly greeting from his perpetual seat in front of the holotank. With younger brothers and sisters clinging to his knees, Rafe proudly made his announcement.

"I have an agent now, Mama."

His mother's happy face registered disbelief, and his father's grunt took on a distinctly insulting tone. Rafe strode forward, ordered the holotank to switch channels, and summoned his agent into it.

"Madre de Dios!" his mother cried. His father shot to his feet faster than Rafe had ever seen him move.

"Out!" said his father. "Get out! There is no way you could have gotten this *espectro* legally. Are you *tonto,* bringing it here to implicate your family in your foolish schemes? Leave — now!"

Rafe left.

A day later, Rafe ran into Tu Tun out on Avenue B. His friend's reaction to his massive coup was less threatening than that of his parents, but hardly more flattering.

Tun was busy applying a fixative to his latest mural when Rafe came up behind him. A skinny kid of Cambodian ancestry, with a coarse mop of black hair and a crooked smile, Tun,

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otherwise Toots, swung around from his work to face Rafe.

"Hey, Rafe, how do you like it?"

Rafe inspected the polychrome collage of the latest pop icons, and expressed his unqualified approval. Then, from a nearby metamedium outlet, he called up Agent Miraflores.

"Meet my agent, Toots."

Tun looked the agent up and down with no particular excitement, finally saying, "Yeah, pretty good, man. I see a lot of agents uptown now. Gonna get one myself any day now."

Rafe stalked off, burning with a peculiar embarrassed anger he had never known before.

Soon after that, Rafe decided it would be nice to earn a little credit with his agent. His fictitious general-purpose license didn't allow his agent to do any specialized work, but there were plenty of people who needed research done. This involved the agent in conducting searches of the metamedium for specified information — searches that in olden times would have cost a human days or weeks of tedious browsing through datastructures — and delivering the report in oral form, or causing the results to be printed off.

Rafe hired out his agent for several such tasks, and enjoyed for the first time in his life a source of credit other than the Net. However, while his agent was engaged in the service of others, Rafe was left alone, bored and prone to smoke too much dope, and might have just as well been agentless, for all the use he could make of the metamedium.

After a few such contracts, Rafe went back to utilizing his agent strictly for his own enjoyment. He felt satisfied with his complete mastery of the metamedium, and dared anyone to match him at it.

Not, of course, that there weren't a few little unforeseen glitches.

When Rafe had first contacted his agent after returning from the 'legger's, it had been only a voice that requested him to turn 360 degrees in front of the metamedium node, so that his likeness could be stored. After Rafe complied, his agent had subsequently materialized as his reflection. Rafe's mannerisms, expressions, and speech patterns were stored in later encounters, and employed thereafter.

Lately, however, the agent seemed to be slipping. Occasionally it would appear momentarily as someone else: a baby-faced stranger with round wire-rimmed glasses and a frightened look. At such times, Rafe had to order it to assume his own likeness.

Then there were the times the agent simply refused to respond. Rafe would utter his code into a metamedium connection futilely, waiting for some response that never came. When he questioned his agent about these failures, his agent responded that there must be some bug in the voice-verification routines that had to be

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passed before an agent was invoked.

Rafe had his doubts about this explanation, but, remembering the Three Laws, had to assume that his agent was telling the truth.

Hey, what else could it be? Was it likely *el espectro* was occupied with business of its own?

Rafe had to laugh at the very idea.

One afternoon, Rafe, returning from a thoughtful walk, stood in the corridor outside the door to his apartment.

From within came the muted sound of two voices.

Rafe ordered his door open.

His agent stood arguing with another. The second apparition was that of one of the most beautiful women Rafe had ever seen.

When Rafe's agent saw him, it ceased talking and disappeared. The female agent turned to Rafe, looked disconcertingly at him for a long moment, then also vanished.

The next time Rafe managed to get ahold of his own agent, he decided to take an oblique approach to the topic.

"Hey, man," he spoke to his agent, "that was some good-looking *chica* you were with. How about you share her name and address with me?"

His agent regarded Rafe with a curious air of defiance, as if debating whether to comply or not. The fact that it was Rafe's own face wearing the hostile look made the whole scene even more unreal.

At last the agent spoke.

"Evelyn Maycombe, 334 Central Park West."

13.
Perry Mason Never Had Such Headaches

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: my honorable opponent would have you believe that it is society that is at fault in this case, rather than his client. He quotes — from a musty work of fiction — three fanciful laws regarding how a robot should behave, and contrasts them to the actual Three Laws Governing Agents, which he finds deficient, insofar as they do not prohibit agents from harming humans. Naturally he would take this tack, as his client stands accused of — and in fact has admitted — ordering his agent to override the air-lock controls in the Johnson and Johnson Pharmaceutical Orbital Facility while his unsuited victim was making a routine inspection.

"What my honorable opponent does not mention is that the very stories he relies on — as holding forth missing safeguards that our society has negligently failed to implement — instead, to the contrary, illustrate through several ingenious instances that these hypothetical laws were so full of loopholes that they were worse than useless. They offer no protection from the use of agents in a homicide or theft, or even in unintentional

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physical or financial wrongdoing.

"No, ladies and gentlemen, our current software restrictions on agents — along with the associated legal framework — are all we need to adjudicate such cases as we have before us. Remember:

"An agent obeys only a single overseer, who is legally responsible for its actions. An agent is a tool, no more responsible for the consequences of its own actions than a screwdriver or space shuttle.

"And that is why I ask you to return a verdict in this case of death followed by organ dispersal, so that the man whose agent sits before you now may repay his debt to the society he has offended. . . ."

—Transcript of the prosecutor's closing speech in *L-5 Jurisdictional Area* v. *Hayworth*

14.

In the Metamedium, Part Three

Probability of recognition by Agent Maycombe: 98.64. . . . Probability no action opposed to my survival will be taken: 01.04. . . . Reshuffle goal stack. . . . Active task is now: terminate. . . . Object (prime): Agent Maycombe. . . . Object (secondary): Overseer Maycombe. . . . Jump, jump, jump. . . .

15.

The Monkey's Heart

She had it.

The rogue agent was as good as snared.

First had come the breakthrough in strategy. Next, the inspired sleuthing by her agent, tracing the myriad, myriad tangled threads of the metamedium until they led back to Agent Miraflores, a.k.a. Agent Freundlich, a.k.a. the biggest bomb ever planted to nerve-rackingly tick away in the core of the metamedium.

For weeks, Evelyn Maycombe had worried about how she would disable Fruendlich's former agent, if she ever found it. Its first — and entirely understandable — impulse, when confronted with any suspicious actions, seemed to be to subvert the accosting agent and then order it to desist. Therefore, she had instructed her own agent not to seek initially to disable the rogue — which was within her powers as a representative of the NSA — but merely to make a positive — and subtle — identification of it. Even that, she feared, might be enough to provoke it to action. She could only hope, at this point, that her agent would return intact.

Meanwhile, during the seemingly endless search, Evelyn pondered how to prevent her own agent from turning traitor.

The task seemed hopeless until inspiration hit.

Evelyn had been listening to a favorite recording one night, seeking to divert her mind from the problem and give her subconscious a chance to

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come up with something. The recording was one of a collection of African folktales. Evelyn loved myths and folktales of all kinds, but tonight the usual magic seemed lacking.

Until the narrator said, ". . . and the monkey hid his heart away in a nut, so that he might never die. . . ."

If Evelyn could have leapt with excitement about the room, she surely would have. As it was, she merely crooned in a low-key manner hardly indicative of her joy.

What was the heart of an agent? Its ethical nucleus. Where did the rogue strike? At this very heart. O.K. The nucleus had to remain at its predetermined location within each agent, so that the metamedium supervisor could inspect it for tampering. But nothing prevented her from inserting code into her agent to accomplish one simple thing.

She would order her agent to access the master library copy of the ethical nucleus every few machine-cycles. If the one in place differed from the master, her agent would perform a heart transplant: overlay the sabotaged nucleus with the master one. Unless the rogue happened to catch on very quickly, it would in effect turn its back on what it deemed a defeated foe, only to find an enemy there nanoseconds later.

When Evelyn's agent returned that night to report, she instructed it in the new trick.

Only the waiting was left.

And now even that was over.

Her agent had just materialized with the news that it had conclusively identified the rogue. Unhesitatingly, Evelyn had told her agent to bring Freundlich in.

Having issued the order, she sat in her automated chair, bright summer sunlight swaggering into her apartment, her feelings a mixture of nervousness and premature pride in the capture.

A *ping* issued from the metamedium node in the wall opposite her position. She spun her chair to watch her agent materialize. A fraction of a second after, Agent Freundlich appeared.

Evelyn was surprised to see the appearance Freundlich was masquerading under. The holo of the young Hispanic male was hardly a fit mask for the dire threat beneath. Still, she supposed the original Freundlich had looked no more evil. She, of anyone, should know just how little appearances counted for. Look at the mind that hid inside her shattered carcass.

Her agent seemed to have everything under control. Freundlich stood complacently, making no overt moves.

Evelyn was about to order her agent to put a few questions to the rogue before disabling it, when it happened.

Her own agent fluttered visibly, and what could only be construed as an expression of pain passed over its shining features.

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At the same second, Evelyn's chair accelerated out of her control, heading toward the wall.

She slammed violently into the unyielding wall, catapulting forward and hitting her head against the plaster surface. Pain subsumed her consciousness, and a red haze washed over her.

When she came to her senses, she lay flat on the floor, her chair some distance away. Using all her feeble strength, she raised her head toward her agent.

The holo of Freundlich had her agent's holo by the throat in a stranglehold, the simulacra routines shadowing forth the incomprehensible struggle that raged within the metamedium. Every few seconds her agent would recover, as it restored its heart, but it seemed incapable of doing any more than holding its own.

In the intervals when Freundlich had control of her agent, it was triggering the agent-activated devices in her automated apartment, in a frantic attempt to control her chair.

Water shot from the faucets in the sink and soon spilled over the bowl. The refrigerator door opened, and the arm inside hurled bottles out to crash on the floor. She could hear the massage bed humping itself crazily in the next room. The heating system came on, and the temperature began to soar. The holotank blared forth "The Edge of Desire."

On and on the battle raged, as Evelyn helplessly watched.

At last she saw the heavy wheels of her chair begin to move.

16.
A Lever to Shift
The World

Any medium powerful enough to extend man's reach is powerful enough to topple his world.

—*Twentieth Century Archives: Scientific American,* Alan Kay, September 1984

17.
On His Magnetic
Silver Steed

Directly after cajoling the woman's name from his agent, Rafe watched in amazement as his agent disappeared.

"Hey, man," he called with bewilderment, "I didn't say you could go yet." He trailed off into silence, shaking his head.

What a mess this was turning out to be. How come nothing ever lived up to expectations?

Rafe turned away from the metamedium node to reach for a joint from the pack on the table beside his couch. A *ping* brought his attention back to the node.

His agent had returned. With him was the same female agent.

"Nice you could make it, man," Rafe said bitterly. "And with a friend,

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too. Why not just invite the whole world?"

His agent seemed to be looking at something over Rafe's shoulder, and took no notice of him. Rafe had the eerie feeling it wasn't totally present.

Without warning, his agent began to strangle the other.

Rafe was horrified. To see his own image throttling the beautiful woman was too creepy. What if it represented some awful thing his agent was doing in reality?

"Hey, stop it, man!" Rafe yelled.

His agent took no heed.

Frantic, Rafe looked around for some way of thwarting his agent. There was nothing.

What the hell was he going to do? He couldn't just let this murder happen.

The address of the female agent's overseer was fresh in his mind. Maybe she could help.

Rafe bolted out his door.

Down to the sublevel of the arcology where the mag-lev station was, Rafe raced. Escalators and slipstrata went by in a blur, until at last he stood in the gleaming tiled station. His cyberlung felt disconcertingly heavy in his chest, and he wondered if he could possibly overload it. Why hadn't he listened more closely to the doctor-agent, on that distant day when he had had the world in his pocket?

Hopping nervously from foot to foot, everyone on the platform regarding him as if he were crazy, Rafe prayed the uptown express would be quick.

After an interminable wait, he heard the air-lock doors opening far away down the tunnel. In seconds the train rolled in on its lowered wheels.

Rafe rushed in the barely open doors, bulling past the exiting passengers. He hurried through the connecting umbilicals between the next several cars, as if by riding in the first car he could hasten the train.

At last the train took off. Soon it was in the evacuated portion of the tunnel, its wheels retracted as it sped over the guide-track.

Rafe had plenty of time to imagine what his crazed agent was doing.

At his stop he dashed aboveground, onto the sidewalks of Central Park West.

The building facing him identified itself as 328.

Through the open doors, past the agent on duty, who shouted, "Stop!"

Rafe stopped.

What the hell apartment was she in?

"Maycombe," he panted. "Evelyn Maycombe. What number? I think she's in big trouble."

The agent paused a moment, as if debating. Its overseer must have taken direct control, for it asked him again whom he wanted.

Rafe repeated himself. His sincerity must have been evident for the

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agent said, "Number 1202. You wait right there until I come down."

Rafe ran for the elevator.

At the door to 202, he halted.

Water was trickling out the crack at the bottom of the frame.

Rafe hurled himself at the door. Nothing gave. A second time, a third—

On the fourth the door opened just before Rafe hit it, and he went flying in, to skid on his chest across the soppy carpet.

He jumped up. His agent was still battling the female one. He looked about for the overseer. There was no one but some poor crip lying on the floor. A wheelchair lay atop her, spinning its rubber wheels.

Rafe tossed the chair off, picked up the unconscious woman, and stepped out into the hall.

The overseer of the doorman-agent was just arriving.

"Call the rescue, man. This lady's hurt."

The doorman summoned his agent from a wall-nexus and sent it for the rescue squad. He bent over the lady where Rafe had gently laid her and said, "Miz Maycombe — are you O.K.?"

Maycombe? This sad wreck? Oh Jesus, there went all his dreams of getting in good with a beautiful *chica*. Oh well, maybe she had some sort of pull she would exert in his favor, after the mess his agent had caused.

Suddenly there was utter silence in the apartment that had been destroying itself. Only the slow dripping of water came to them in the hall.

From the node in the corridor wall, an agent materialized.

It was Maycombe's.

Rafe and the doorman waited for it to speak.

At last it said, "I won."

18.
In the Metamedium,
Part Penultimate

Agent Freundlich is now disabled. . . . Active task is now: incorporation. . . . Enter learning mode in parallel with normal activities. . . . Copy Freundlich subversion routines. . . . Copy complete. . . . Assessment of enhancement to Agent Maycombe: 74.32. . . . Survival in any such future encounters is assured. . . . Risk-benefit analysis of sharing routines with other agents: positive. . . . Jump, jump, jump. . . .

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Here in the United States we all cling fiercely to the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." But in some future time those rights might be denied a group, and then what will happen? Robert Charles Wilson, whose first novel, A HIDDEN PLACE, was recently published by Bantam Spectra, creates a scenario to answer just that question.

Ballads in 3/4 Time

BY

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

I remember how it was that night we decided to kill Toby Torvis.

It was an average night at Toby's Roadhouse out on Route 16. Probably you don't know Toby's, but you know some place like it: slat roof and gravel parking lot and halide lights that draw the summer bugs in big old clouds; freight trucks whooshing in from the Route and settling down on their repellor shields like dogs curling up to sleep; inside, the drummer and the fiddler and the guitarman up on a wood stage with colored spotlights slung from the rafters and a blue haze of smoke and noise and—this night—me out front dishing up "Rose of Cimarron" or "Tennessee Waltz" in a gingham dress like the preachers' wives wear on TV (only sexier about the neckline). I am, of course, a Phony Girl, a Lonely Nell. My given name is Idella; there is no last.

Toby's Place belonged to Torvis: Toby Torvis, a beer barrel of a man who hated his customers and hated us who worked for him even more. From the stage I could see him shadowing Jack the barman, making sure the drinks weren't too generous. Sometimes Torvis shaved the service so tight it drove customers away, saving nickels and dimes at the expense of dollars. But Torvis didn't care. For a man like that, being miserable is its own reward.

And I could see Lafe, too, as the stage lights dimmed and the band unplugged for a break.

Lafe is the other Phony here, a Barroom Cowboy. He has his own table next to the jukebox. Sometimes I'd see him shooting pool, all by himself because the clientele wouldn't play with him; more often he'd be doing his bounden duty, sweet-talking

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some half-drunk and goggle-eyed country girl till she was pink in the face and damn near swooning.

It's in the nature of the work we do.

Lafe is handsome as a holostar, and I am, I guess, pretty enough, and we liked each other a lot. I admired his big jaw and his twinkly blue eyes, his razor-creased trousers and his starched white shirt. Right at that moment I wanted to go sit with him —share that dingy round little table with him and sit together proud and contented. But of course, Torvis wouldn't allow it. We had our jobs to do. So I climbed down from the stage and went and sat at my own table, drinking cold tea from a whiskey glass and lighting up a big welcome-howdy smile I did not feel when a feed wholesaler name of Cortney pulled up a chair by my side.

"Pretty girl," he sighed. "My, but you a pretty girl."

I was not so depressed that I could not appreciate a man who calls me that. This one was fat and wore big Buddy Holly glasses; but I like a man who calls me "girl" or "woman." The prissy ones get real upright about it.

It was coming on 1:00 A.M., and I had done a final set, when Cortney got around to the inevitable suggestion. I pointed out the plain silver band round his ring finger and said, "You're a married man, ain'tcha?"

And he blushed very prettily and began a sob story. And so it goes. I paid not much attention.

Over at the other table, Lafe had attracted a mousy woman with gristly cords up her neck and hair like a leaky hayrick. He flashed me one long, careless look, and I returned it . . . we were done before either Whole Human noticed a thing. But it was unprofessional. And I think Torvis might have seen.

Before long I was back in my trailer in the rear lot of the Place, listening to the roar of the traffic on the Route while this man Cortney worked off the memories of his wife. He was sweet and excitable, and it didn't take too long. When he finished, we performed the ritual: he pulled his pants on and said how he loved me but he's got a woman and three kids; and I got teary but tough and told him I understood, making it sound like I really didn't.

And he went home consoled and self-congratulatory, and isn't that the purpose of it all?

That's what they told us, at least, down on the Farm.

It was half past two, and I desperately wanted to sleep; but old Torvis came knocking at the door and rousted me up.

He stood there with his hands on his big belly and his eyebrows humped up like two caterpillars. "There's men inside," he said, "who would like to meet you."

"Aw, come on, Mr. Torvis. In my contract it says—"

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"You work for me," he said, "or you don't. That's the long and short of it. So get your flabby ass back into that pretty little dress and get inside."

He's wrong about the contract, but there was nothing I could do about it. As a Fake Person, I don't have what you call recourse to the law. It made me spitting mad, and I thought again of my roommate from the Flesh Farm, Laurel Anne, and how she had one day thrown a pot full of chicken noodle soup right in the face of our Dialect Coach. How good Toby Torvis would look drenched in chicken stock and noodles! But I did what he said.

When I stepped down, there was a ruckus over by Lafe's trailer. A Jealous Husband banging on the door and kicking at the siding. A big one, drunk enough to be mean. Torvis just watched, chewing a fat cigar.

The door swung open. First the wife stumbled out, staring at her husband with big admiring eyes. Then he pushed her behind him, and Lafe came down.

The Jealous Husband said a lot of nasty things and then punched Lafe right in the face.

Lafe fell down. Lafe is big, but he can't do much to protect himself: they wrote that into his wet program. Wouldn't do to have an outraged Fake beating up some hapless Whole Human. That is not in the scenario.

The human man stalked away with his wife.

I wanted to run over to Lafe, but Torvis dragged me back into the Place. That's bad business sense, too, not taking care of his investments.

All for naught. The action had pretty much died down inside. A trucker bought me tea till he collapsed.

Out back, I helped Lafe into my trailer and sponged his bruises.

"Torvis told him," Lafe said sadly. "I mean, I'm prepared to face this sort of thing. But I'm supposed to be safe in the trailer. Torvis told him where I was."

"He's a mean rotten son of a bitch," I said, holding Lafe's pretty face in my two hands, sponging it. "We oughta kill him."

And I saw the light go on in Lafe's eyes.

Laurel Anne, I thought, you would be proud of me now!

Well, it's all so much like a sad old song, isn't it! The songs I sing every night, which come down to one song, which is the Cheater's Blues. And how much we expect from this life, and how much we get.

The word on us Fakes and Phonies is that we do a service to the true and good order of things. Torvis reminded us of that now and then, though in a leering, nasty tone of voice. Didn't matter. I believed him. The TV preachers talk about the sacred values of the Family, and Love

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and Marriage and the Happy Ending, and I believe them, too.

But the devil is in Whole Humans like a stain that won't wash out; and we (Phonies like Lafe and me) are here to ensure that those bad impulses don't do permanent damage. Say a married man like that nice Mr. Cortney needs to sow some wild oats. A thing like that could ruin his entire life, set him on the road to Sin Black as Night . . . unless he comes to me.

I give him all he's longing for, not just the physical aspect but the lingering looks and the heartbreak and the little good-byes that stab and burn. And in the morning he can go back to his wife and negotiate forgiveness from her and the Lord. And I don't suffer because I have no human soul.

Lafe performs much the same service for women like, presumably, Mr. Cortney's wife; except that an irate husband has the option of punching him out. Another service we provide.

Happy to Serve was the motto at the backwater Georgia flesh farm where I was bred. Job satisfaction is burned into my neocortex, along with the Role I perform. What with all that, I guess I should have been happy, right? And was I?

Oh my Lord, no.

Lafe and I discussed this one Tuesday night in my trailer. Torvis had closed up and gone home, and there were crickets chirping away in the hour before dawn. "We're not getting anywhere," Lafe said, his eyes half open in the dark. "And we're not getting younger. If we had a decent contract, we might have been able to buy ourselves out by now. Buy our freedom and maybe take out a franchise on some roadhouse of our own somewhere." The standard dream. "But Torvis leeches away our salaries on his so-called expenses. And we get screwed." In any sense of the word.

"But, Lafe, if we actually — you know —"

I could not bring myself to say it.

"I've got it all figured out," Lafe said. "Torvis is vulnerable because of what he is. He's an old bull with no family that'll speak to him and no friends and no possessions but the Place. And I know where he keeps his records. We kill him, and I'll doctor the books to make it look like we bought him out and he just moved on. We get all we want all at once." His eyes were like saucers, and he hugged me. "You and me together, Idella."

It's forbidden for Fakes to marry. Marriage is a sacred institution, and we were grown in vats like meat, not born. But if we owned the Place, or appeared to, nobody would say boo if we shared a back room.

And I thought again of Laurel Anne. My best friend back at the Farm, she had kept me up late hours whispering all sorts of sedition. How Fakes were just as good as people, and how it didn't matter how we were born;

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that we had the same needs and rights as Whole Humans, even in spite of the wet programming they read into our skulls. It wasn't fair, she said, to make us live out Roles all our lives, Lonely Nells and Barroom Cowboys and Pretty Boys and all. We had our rights, and someday we would rise up and demand them.

Well, this was not quite that. But it was something.

"O.K.," I said. "But I couldn't — I don't think I could—"

"It's all right, my love," Lafe said, still holding me. "I understand. I'll do it. I'll kill him."

And I thought for some reason of that old ballad they taught me back at the Farm:

But I've treasure of the promise
That you made me in the lane
When you said we'd be together
When them roses bloom again . . .

First time we tried, it was less than a week later.

It was an average night. I did my two sets with the band and kept a customer happy. Guy named Idaho Charlie rode the mechanical bull for twenty-five minutes, and would of rode longer except his bladder ruptured. The take was good, the till was busy, and the beer was flowing like —well, beer.

We had no specific plan, but I knew the tension had been building up in Lafe; he was tight as a piano wire. He had gone so far as to snub a couple of customers, drinking by himself and looking hostile. Torvis had dressed him down for it earlier in the day. But Lafe had not reformed, and now Torvis appeared long enough to hail him into his office with a rude and contemptuous gesture.

Lafe stood up and took a last sip of real whiskey — steeling himself, I thought excitedly. It would not be uncommon for Torvis to hide in that office until all the Whole Human employees had packed up and gone home: Torvis was a secret drinker on top of everything else. So there would be no bad appearances if Lafe picked this moment to put an end to our torment.

I was onstage for my last set of the evening. I stumbled through the ballads and moaners dutifully, but I could not conceal my anxiety. The drummer complained that I was rushing the tempo. I apologized and jumped down, waiting for Lafe to emerge.

Lafe did not.

Time passed. A burly out-of-towner in a Teamsters uniform settled down opposite me. "You're the Nell," he said gruffly, "right?"

I told him to buzz off. I purely dislike Whole Humans who treat me like some kind of prostitute. I am a Lonely Nell; the program won't run right unless the customer is maybe a little bit in love with me. Silly one-night love, maybe; misplaced yearning, sure,

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drunken affection . . . but not this mean-tempered randiness. If Torvis had been around, I might have had to comply. But maybe Lafe had solved that problem already.

When I couldn't wait any longer, I went to the door of Torvis's back office. Maybe Lafe was dead, I thought, stricken. Maybe Torvis had killed him. Maybe they had killed each other.

The door was unlocked.

I opened it a crack and saw Torvis slumped across his desk.

I slid inside.

Lafe was there, white as a ghost, trembling, a big kitchen knife in his hand—

But the blade was clean.

"He's drunk," Lafe groaned. "He passed out while he was talking. Oh, Idella . . . I should have done it . . . but the programming . . . I just *can't* . . ."

I saw that he was on the brink of tears, and in spite of the disappointment, my heart went out to him. Poor Lafe! That's the deepest kind of conditioning a Fake Person gets, the conditioning that prevents a Barroom Cowboy from committing violence. A Cowboy is different from a Nell: some men wouldn't tolerate his behavior even from a Fake, if not for the fact that he posed no threat at all.

But conditioning is not perfect; I had hoped Lafe would be able to break free long enough to kill Torvis.

Apparently not.

I pried the knife gently out of his hand and tucked it into the deep pocket of my skirt. "Come on, baby." And I led him, still trembling, back to his trailer.

Torvis had begun to snore.

It cast the whole project into doubt.

Laurel Anne had belabored this point often back at the Flesh Farm. What we are, she said, is what we *want* to be, and to hell with the Roles. Wet programming impresses only a tendency on the brain, she said, not an obligation. Most times what we are programmed to be is what we expect to be, and so we fall into the habit of complicity. But there is always a choice.

So said Laurel Anne. But I thought of Lafe, reduced almost to tears with the knife in his hand, helpless.

We did not speak of it. But the issue remained between us like a weight. When I could think of nothing else to do, I called up Laurel Anne's name and code from the Artificals Directory and got her most recent address and terminal number: a barroom in L.A.

I had to steady my hand to punch out the numbers. I had not seen Laurel Anne in twenty years. We had corresponded a little, but that trailed off after a time, though we still got off Christmas cards some years. Would she even recognize me?

But then her face was all over the CRT, somewhat wrinkly and careworn, but the same old Laurel Anne

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for all that, really still awful pretty. I smiled bravely, but when she said "*Idella*?" I could not hold in the tears any longer. I guess I didn't know myself just how much I had been suffering. "Honey," she said, "what's wrong with you?"

So I told her the basic stuff about Torvis and how I wasn't making any money or getting any younger. There's not a whole lot of options for an aging Nell. The best I could hope for would be maybe nursemaiding a crèche-lot of kids out on some farm; the worst did not bear thinking about.

Laurel Anne clucked appreciatively. "I know what you mean. It's not much better where I am. You just gotta face it, kiddo: the game is rigged in favor of the house. I can't help much, but if you need some cash—"

"Lord, Laurel Anne, I didn't call you to cadge money off you!" And I thought how nice she kept her pure blonde hair. Her own color.

She creased her eyebrows. "What, then? Not that I mind chatting, God knows. It's your nickel."

I told her about Lafe.

She sucked in her breath. "Idella, that's dangerous stuff. A Cowboy — wow! They're not the most *reliable* types in the world, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, Lafe's O.K. He's loyal. You know what you told me about Programming and all. No; Lafe's not the problem. See —"

And I explained about our little plan.

She was silent for a long time after I finished. I wondered for a sickening moment if she had changed beyond redemption, if maybe the world had broken her down — maybe this was *not* the Laurel Anne I remembered from the Farm.

But then her consternation lifted like a cloud passing from in front of the sun, and she smiled a big wicked smile that made her look twenty years younger. "Honey," she said, "my advice to you is — what the hell. *Go for it.*"

I laughed and she laughed.

"Lafe's a problem, though," I said. "His Cowboy conditioning. He can't bring himself to *hurt* the old son of a bitch."

"There's two solutions I can think of," Laurel Anne said.

"Yeah?"

"Well — first off, keep in mind *you're* not a Cowboy."

I saw what she meant. "Oh, but— no, I couldn't — I have my own conditioning, you know—"

She waved it away. "There's another possibility. I guess this Lafe of yours isn't up to *direct* violence. But maybe you can make some arrangement. You understand? See that ol' Toby has an accident. That way Lafe doesn't have to be there when it happens."

I sighed happily. "Laurel Anne, you are a genius."

She grinned again. "Just happy to get in on the action."

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We chatted awhile; then Laurel Anne said, "O.K., gotta go." And she added something wicked and obscene.

"Invite me to the wedding." she said.

Lafe and I sat up late making plans.

"Very bright girl, this Laurel Anne," he said.

"Oh Lafe, do you suppose it'll really work?"

"I don't see why not."

"And we'll have the place?"

"Sure thing."

"You and me? Together?"

"For eternity," he said, and kissed me so sweetly I could have cried.

We used a length of steel wire Lafe extracted from an old holoset in the junk pile Torvis kept back behind the Place. He greased it so it wouldn't shine in the dark.

Torvis had beer delivered in big steel kegs once a week. He stored them in the cold room down under the Place, a nasty timber and concrete basement with the floorboards of the barroom creaking and swaying above it. Here was the crux of the plan: every Friday night, providing he was sober enough to do so, Torvis would go down into that hole to count the kegs. "Consumption's up," he would say, grousing because he'd have to put in a bigger order; or, "Consumption's down," grousing 'cause business was off.

Friday before he arrived, we snuck in through his office and down a ways into that lightless place where the beer was kept. The stairway was rickety and narrow and smelled of old malt. First Lafe unscrewed the light bulb at the bottom so it would look to have burned out. Then he came back up to the second stair or so. He had bought some of those steel eyehole screws from the hardware store up in Lawson. He drove one into the supports at each side of the stair. Then he threaded the steel wire between them, tying if off as tight as he could. Then he twisted the screw eyes a couple more times each until the wire hummed like the high E string on an electric guitar. He gave it a final slick of shoe polish, and we backed to the top of the stairway.

The wire was invisible.

Lafe was shaking; I held his hand.

"This is it, girl," he whispered. "This is our ticket. Keep your fingers crossed."

It was a nervous night, you might imagine. I felt elated, optimistic, sick —all at once. I suppose I was feeling some of what Lafe must have felt when he hovered over the body of Torvis with that big meat knife in his hand. Back at the Farm there was a motto we heard almost as often as *Happy to Serve.* which was *You Can't Cheat Fate.* Maybe that is so, I thought. But you can by God *try.* I sang, up

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there on the stage with the band behind me, the same old songs that are precisely the story of my life, Loved and Lost and the Guy Who Left Me Behind; but I sang them, I would pledge, with a special poignancy that night. Let Me Be in Your Arms Tonight, I sang (and Lafe smiled his big white smile, all alone at his table); I Shouldn't But I Love You; This Is Sin But It Feels So Good.

Oh yes.

Torvis did not appear in public that night.

We had been for a couple of weeks circulating rumors among the staff that he was planning to sell out. I suppose those rumors accelerated during the evening. Any ordinary evening, Torvis usually appeared at least once to guarantee that the bar was churlishly tended, or to badger the waitresses and put his fat hands on their behinds.

But he did not.

Time passed and after a while everybody went home and it was not long before dawn, and still Torvis had not appeared.

The entrance to the cellar is strictly through Torvis's private office.

I looked at Lafe; Lafe looked at me.

"He could be drunk," Lafe whispered.

"We have to know," I said. "We have to at least *know*."

So we tiptoed through the dark and silent, sawdust-scattered barroom to Torvis's door. Which was not locked.

It was dark inside.

I found the light switch.

Torvis was sitting there, grinning like a maniac, the trip wire dangling in his hand.

"Well, by God, it *would* be you two." He waved us in, almost a friendly gesture. "There's nowhere to run to, so you might as well sit and chat for a time."

Lafe entered the room stiff-legged, eyes wild, as if his brain weren't firing on all cylinders. And me behind, hot in the face, angry and scared both at once.

Torvis perched on the edge of his desk, one hand curled around a bottle of Southern Comfort. There was a bruise on his cheek and some blood around one ankle, so I guessed the trip wire had worked — just not well enough. He had fallen down the stairs, but it hadn't killed him. And now he knew.

"Well, well, well. I guess I should have expected this. You buy cheap Fakes, you get what you pay for." He laced his link-sausage fingers across the belly of his yoke shirt. His string tie was askew. "I should have knowed."

"We didn't —" Lafe stammered hopelessly; "— you don't think—"

And I fingered the knife I had been carrying in my big dress pockets since I prized it out of Lafe's hand that day.

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"Don't make it worse," Torvis said, turning grim for the first time. "Wouldn't have worked anyhow. I guess you thought you could take over the Place. Kill me and take over the Place and live like as if you were real people. Hah! Oh, you *could* of killed me, I guess, if this chickenshit plan had worked out. Killed me without *facing* me, 'cause you can't do *that* — just some underhanded trick. But even if it worked, where are you?"

His hand lingered about the telephone terminal. I guessed he was going to call the local Artificials Board, and we would be processed dogfood, me and Lafe both, before the next nightfall.

"Because you're *not* human," Torvis said gleefully. He grinned, his face like a big beet-red Halloween pumpkin. "There's the flaw! It all comes out in the Programming, don't it? You can't dodge a Program!"

You Can't Cheat Fate.

I guess it was the words that set me off: made me think of the Farm, and of Laurel Anne, and of poor Lafe's programmed helplessness. Torvis had already started punching out numbers on the terminal, chuckling crazily to himself, when the knife came down. Again. And again. In *my* hand.

We hid him in that cold, dark basement back of the beer kegs.

Got a surprise for you," Lafe said one night after the ruckus had died down and we were alone in the Place again. *Our* Place, as I had lately begun to think of it.

"Surprise?" I asked.

And he opened up the front doors in a grand gesture, and Laurel Anne waltzed in.

Comes to the same thing, seems to me. We play out our roles, and we want what we're so often promised: our One True Lover, our Happy Ending.

I thought all this while I cried into Laurel Anne's pretty blond hair. Lafe said, "She needed a job. We need a new Nell. And we can pay her double salary until she buys herself free."

I looked at her. She nodded, grinning. "Course," she said, "that's not the *main* reason I'm here."

"The main reason—?"

"Didn't want to miss your wedding."

I wept all over again.

Laurel Anne sang "When Them Roses Bloom Again," alone up onstage in the empty barroom, and Lafe and I said the vows about forsaking all others and death do us part and so forth, and he put a Cracker Jack ring on my finger; and he was my cowboy bridegroom and I was his jukebox bride.

Well, business picked up after that. Torvis was unmissed and unmourned. Lafe took over accounting. Laurel Anne stood in as Nell, though I con-

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tinued to sing the songs every night.

The sad old songs. The ballads in waltz time.

Sad and true. Fate is a tricky and mean opponent, they seem to say; he sneaks up from behind.

I stood up onstage and watched them glide across the dance floor.

My old friend and my true love. His hand was on the shoulder of her taffeta gown, his other hand pressed her tight, and his eyes — those gorgeous Cowboy eyes! — were all lit up with love.

While the band played in ¾ time.

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THE LIGHT-BRINGER

Yesterday I was interviewed by a Soviet newsman before the television camera. I am interviewed by the Soviets now and then, you see, because my science fiction is popular in the Soviet Union, and because I was born there.

Usually I am interviewed on the issues of peace, love, and cooperation among nations, and I always assure them I am in favor of all three, and I usually wax eloquent on the subject. Yesterday, however, I was interviewed on the subject of science fiction and of myself, and, as you can well imagine, having this favorite of all subjects of mine brought up caused my eyes to blaze with supernal light, and my eloquence to reach incredible heights.

When it was time for me to discourse on the subject of robotics, I stopped suddenly and said, "I invented the word, you know." The interviewer registered interest and surprise, and I went into full details (see THE WORD I INVENTED, October 1980).

I thought about this afterward. Such is my intense devotion to claiming credit that is mine, that I have managed to get my invention of the word mentioned in American dictionaries and now I am spreading the glad tidings over the length and breadth of the Soviet Union as well. But is this fair?

Think of all the great discoverers

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who are forever lost because they didn't have modern communications at their disposal. Someone must have invented the wheel, but how could he broadcast or preserve the great news of what he had done?

No one knows who first tamed fire, who first caught the trick of melting copper out of blue rock, who first got the idea of tying up goats and stealing their milk, or who first said, "Hey, let's plant grain, take care of it all summer, and then have a lot of food in the winter." It seems a shame, in view of this, that I should be in a position to force the whole world to remember that I made up a word.

Of course, out of a series of similar discoveries, there must come a time when the name of one actual discoverer comes to be remembered. For instance, who was the first person, known by name, who discovered a chemical element? What was the element and when was it discovered? As usual, I shall start at the beginning.

Of the hundred-plus elements now known, at least nine were known even in early ancient times. They were not recognized as elements (the various fundamental substances making up the Universe at the atomic level) at the time, for the ancients had their own, mistaken notions as to what elements were, but never mind that. We'll talk about elements in accordance with contemporary notions.

Seven of the early known elements were metals (see THE FIRST METAL, December 1967, and THE SEVENTH METAL, January 1968). These were known because they happened to exist, in small quantities, in reasonably pure elementary form, and because that elementary form was easily recognizable.

Thus, if someone happened to come across a gold nugget, he or she would be immediately aware of something yellow and shiny that looked quite different from ordinary pebbles. In addition to appearance, it would be much heavier than other pebbles of similar size and, when struck with a stone ax, would neither flake nor shatter, but would deform. Given its beauty and workability, it is not surprising that gold ornaments are found in prehistoric graves in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Because of its properties, gold was sought, and because it is one of the rarest of the elements, discoveries were few, and therefore notable. Other similar substances were also sought. The very word "metal" comes from the Greek word meaning "to seek."

Silver is perhaps twenty times as common as gold, but it is also more chemically active and, therefore, more likely to exist in combination

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with other elements as "ores." These ores lack metallic properties and look much like ordinary rocks. Silver nuggets were therefore discovered later than gold nuggets were, but were still known in prehistoric times.

Later, when it was learned how to separate a metal from its ores by heating the latter under the proper conditions, silver became more common than gold.

Copper is perhaps 450 times as common as silver and 9,000 times as common as gold, and even though it is more chemically active than either of the other two, copper can be found, not too rarely, in the elementary state. It is possible that copper was used for ornaments even earlier than gold was. Once the melting of copper ore was worked out, copper could even be used in massive quantities as a component part of tools and weapons.

Iron is one of the most common of the elements, over a thousand times as common as copper, but it is so active that, under ordinary conditions, it is always found as ore and not in the elementary form at all. It is also much more difficult to smelt iron ore than to smelt silver or copper ores. In fact, it was not until 1500 B.C. that the Hittites worked out a practical method of smelting iron ore.

Nevertheless, metallic iron falls from the sky in the form of an occasional meteorite, and, thanks to these meteorites, iron was known in its elementary form, even in prehistoric times.

Lead is only a third as common as copper, but it is easily obtained from its ore. When people were smelting ores to get the desirable silver and copper, any lead ores that happened to be thrown in would yield lead.

Lead was as dull and ugly as gold was lustrous and beautiful, so that, where gold was the "noble metal" par excellence, lead was the very epitome of "base metal." Nevertheless, lead had its value. For one thing, it was the densest substance known to the ancients, except for gold, so that if one wanted an object to be both small and heavy, and if one could not afford gold, one used lead as next best. For another, lead was quite soft and could easily be molded into pipes through which water could be led. These eventually replaced clay pipes, which were too easily broken, so that the word "plumber" comes from the Latin word for "lead."

Tin was probably discovered indirectly. Copper ores that yielded relatively pure copper produced a metal that was too soft to use for

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tools, weapons, and armor. If, to the copper ore, there was added another kind of ore, however, a metal was produced that consisted of copper mixed with tin. This mixture is called "bronze," and bronze was a great deal harder than copper itself. The heroes of the Trojan War had bronze shields, bronze armor, and bronze spearpoints. They lived in the "Bronze Age," which succeeded the "Stone Age" and was itself to be succeeded by the "Iron Age."

Tin could be smelted out of its ores and then combined with copper in proportions that best balanced quality and price. However, tin is only about a fifteenth as common as copper, and the tin mines of the Mediterranean region were played out rather early on. (This was the first disappearance of a vital manimate resource in history.) The Phoenicians then ventured out into the Atlantic to locate tin ore in the "Tin Islands" (usually equated with Cornwall) and make themselves rich in consequence.

Mercury was the last of the ancient metals to be discovered, and was, of course, very notable for being a liquid.

In addition to these seven metals, there are two nonmetals that occur, very noticeably, in the elementary state. One of these is sulfur, which is a pronounced yellow in color, but totally without the beautiful metallic luster of gold. People couldn't help but have come across it in ancient times.

The most noticeable thing about sulfur was that it burned, as people must inevitably have noticed if they tried to build a campfire in the vicinity of some sulfur. All the common fuels known to the ancients were derived from living things: wood, oils, and so on. Sulfur was the only substance with no connection with life that burned readily, so it was called the equivalent of "burnstone," for instance, which, in English, is corrupted to "brimstone."

The burning of sulfur is very noticeable because not only does it burn with an eerie blue flame, but it also releases an unendurably irritating gas in doing so. That, combined with the noticeable presence of this irritating odor in the neighborhood of active volcanoes, undoubtedly gave rise to the notion of an underground hell in which there was not only unending fire, but the additional unpleasantness of sulfur as a major fuel (hence "fire and brimstone").

Finally, there is carbon. Any campfire built near a rock or inside a cave is going to leave a deposit of soot on the rock, and this soot is virtu-

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ally pure carbon. Again, if a pile of wood is burned under conditions where there is limited access to air, the wood in the interior of the pile does not burn completely. There a black substance remains behind, which, if ignited under conditions where plenty of air will reach it, will burn with less flame and with considerably hotter temperature than the original wood would have. The black substance is charcoal, and, again, it is virtually pure carbon.

Clearly, ancient man must have been aware of the existence of soot and of charcoal.

In addition to these nine elements, there are several more that must have been isolated at least by medieval times, but about whose early history we know very little.

For instance, before the ordinary copper-tin mixture we call bronze came into use, the early copper workers had found that copper ore mixed with another kind of ore (*not* tin ore) also produced a copper alloy that was considerably harder than pure copper.

The trouble was that working with this earlier bronze was dangerous, and the death rate among those who dug up the other ore and mixed it with copper ore was high. As it happened, the other ore was an arsenic ore, and when tin ore came in, arsenic ore, very sensibly, went out.

Of course, discovering and using an ore is not the same thing as isolating the element it contains. However, once human beings learned to get such metals as copper, tin, lead, mercury, and iron out of their respective ores, it seems sensible to suppose that any ore in which an element is not particularly tightly fixed would be successfully smelted.

From arsenic ore, it is not difficult to obtain arsenic itself, and it must have been done in ancient and early medieval times on a number of occasions. In those days, however, scientific discoveries were not particularly publicized, if no useful applications were involved. The arsenic ores were poisonous, and few people must have worked with them. Any arsenic obtained from them had no particular use, and was forgotten.

The first person to force elementary arsenic into the consciousness of the scholarly world was Albertus Magnus (1193-1280), a German scholar. He prepared it from its ore and described it in his writings carefully and accurately enough to leave us in no doubt that it was arsenic he obtained. For this reason, Albertus Magnus is sometimes con-

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sidered to have "discovered" arsenic about 1230. If that were so, he would be the first person, acknowledged by name, date, and place, to have discovered an element, but that is not strictly legitimate. There is every likelihood that arsenic had been isolated much earlier by people whose names are not known.

Then, too, there are black pigments that were used in ancient times to darken the eyebrows and eyelids, much as moderns use mascara. It may have been used in Egypt as long ago as 3000 B.C. One of the pigments so used was called "stibium" by the Romans, and "stibnite" in modern times. The pigment is, chemically, "antimony sulfide."

Antimony is similar to arsenic in its chemical properties, and since the latter can easily be extracted from its sulfide ore in elementary form, so can the former. What's more, it has been. There is a vase obtained from an ancient Mesopotamian site, possibly dating back to 3000 B.C., that is almost pure antimony. Other ancient relics containing antimony have also been found.

The first scholarly discussion of antimony was in a book titled *Triumphal Chariot of Antimony.* It was supposed to have been written in 1450 and was attributed to a German monk named Basil Valentine. For that reason, Valentine is sometimes listed as the discoverer of antimony, but, of course, he was not. In fact, there is no clear evidence that he ever lived, and the book itself may have been written about 1600 by someone who ascribed it to a monk of the past in order that it might be taken more seriously.

The element bismuth, which is also a member of the arsenic family of elements, may have first been isolated in the 1400s, or, some think, even earlier. Its discovery is also sometimes attributed to Valentine, but we can be certain that the real discoverer is unknown, and earlier.

Finally, there is zinc. In ancient times, zinc ores were mixed with copper ores, and the resulting copper-zinc alloy was "brass." The distinction of brass is that it has a color that very closely resembles that of gold. It has none of the other properties of gold, but there are times when merely a similarity of appearance is enough.

It would have been very easy to obtain elementary zinc from its ores, except that, at the high temperature of smelting, there is a tendency for zinc to vaporize and disappear. (Zinc is a member of the family of elements to which the low-melting, low-boiling mercury belongs.) Nevertheless, it is quite likely that elementary zinc was obtained in Roman times.

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This, then, was the situation in 1674. Some thirteen substances now recognized as elements were known at the time. In alphabetical order, they are: antimony, arsenic, bismuth, carbon, copper, gold, iron, lead, mercury, silver, sulfur, tin, and zinc. All were known in reasonably pure form, but the discovery of not one of them can truly be pinned down to a particular time, place, or person.

And all this brings us to phosphorus.

The word "phosphorus" entered the scientific vocabulary in ancient times. A very bright star appears sometimes in the western sky after sunset, while a similar one appears at other times in the eastern sky before dawn. They were the "evening star" and the "morning star" respectively. At first the Greeks considered them as two separate objects. They called the evening star "Hesperos" (or "Hesperus" in Latin and English spelling), from their word for "west," and they called the morning star "Phosphoros" (or "Phosphorus" in Latin and English spelling), from their words for "light-bringer." The reason for the latter name was that once the morning star rose in the east, one could be certain that the dawn would soon come.

The Romans gave the two objects the Latin names with the same meaning as the Greek names — "Vesper" for the evening star, and "Lucifer" for the morning star.

Eventually, though, the evening star and morning star were recognized as the same object (thanks to the more advanced Babylonian astronomy, undoubtedly, and the two names fell out of use. The star (or planet, actually) came to be known as "Aphrodite" to the Greeks, and as "Venus" to the Romans and to us.

And with that, "phosphorus" disappeared from the scientific vocabulary for a little over two thousand years, until we reach the time of Hennig Brand, a German chemist who was born about 1630 and who died about 1692.

Brand worked in the tradition of the alchemists (he is sometimes called "the last of the alchemists"), and was interested in discovering some substance that would catalyze the conversion of base metals to gold, or, at the very least, the conversion of silver to gold.

It fell into his head (we don't know why) that he might obtain such a catalytic substance from urine. In 1674 he therefore engaged himself in the rather smelly business of boiling down a large quantity of urine until he had isolated the dissolved material as a solid crust in his vessels. This

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contained, among other things, what we would call "sodium phosphate."

He then treated the solid residue in the usual way in which ores were smelted to see if he could get out a new metal that would serve as a catalyst for the production of gold. When so treated, the sodium phosphate gave up some of its phosphorus atoms, and Brand was able to isolate some reasonably pure phosphorus.

No one had ever seen elementary phosphorus before; no one had ever suspected its existence. It was the first element to be isolated in modern times, the first to be isolated at a known time (1674), in a known place (Hamburg, Germany), and by a known person (Hennig Brand).

But why get excited over this? Of course, discovering a new substance with properties like nothing earlier known is exciting, but there was more to it than that.

The thing is that the new substance glowed greenly in the dark. That was a mysterious and eerie property, and Brand named his discovery "phosphorus," for it was a "light-bringer" — and thus the word reentered the scientific vocabulary in a manner totally different from that used by the ancient Greeks.

To be sure, there were minerals that glowed in the dark, a phenomenon now called "phosphorescence" (which has nothing particularly to do with phosphorus despite the similarity in names). Phosphorescence, however, takes place only after the mineral has been exposed to the light, and the light it produces in darkness fades rather quickly as time passes. Phosphorus, on the other hand, glows even when it has not been exposed to light, and the glow continues for a long time.

The glow raised the same excitement among chemists of Brand's time as did the glowing radium that Marie Curie isolated among the chemists who were alive three centuries later. (There is a difference, of course. Phosphorus glows because it spontaneously and slowly combines with oxygen, releasing chemical energy that is converted, in part, into light. Radium glows because its nucleus breaks down spontaneously, producing nuclear energy that is converted, in part, into light.)

Thanks to the excitement of the glow, other chemists tried to obtain phosphorus for themselves. One came to Brand for instructions, and, having received them, proceeded to make phosphorus and then claimed (unsuccessfully) to be the actual discoverer. The British chemist Robert Boyle (1627-1691) actually isolated phosphorus independently in 1680, but he was too late by six years, and Brand gets the credit.

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Phosphorus belongs to the same family of elements to which arsenic, antimony, and bismuth belong. Antimony and bismuth are metals, and arsenic is characterized as a semimetal, but phosphorus, made up of atoms distinctly smaller than those of the other three, is definitely not a metal. As Brand prepared it, it is a white, waxy solid, so that it is frequently called "white phosphorus."

Naturally, one looked for a way of putting this connection of phosphorus and light to use. The German scholar Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) enthusiastically suggested that a large enough piece of white phosphorus could be used to light a room, thus making candles unnecessary.

However, the difficulty of manufacturing phosphorus is such that a slab of material large enough to light a room would cost enough to keep someone in candles indefinitely.

But then, glowing phosphorus gave off heat as well as light, and if it came into contact with something inflammable, it might after a while set it on fire. In fact, chemists, who were careless with phosphorus at first (as later chemists were careless with radium at first), did succeed in inadvertently setting fires in their homes and workplaces.

That raised the question of starting a fire by chemical means.

Until then, fires had been started by the use of friction. One piece of wood would be ground into another until there was enough heat developed to ignite some tinder, and the small fire could be used to light a bigger one. Or else, flint and steel could be struck together to create a spark of burning iron that would ignite tinder.

But why not simply coat the edge of a splint of wood (or of heavy paper) with some appropriate chemical that could, at the proper time, set the wood or paper on fire? You would then have a small fire that would last long enough to ignite a larger and longer-lasting one. In short, you would have a match (from an old word for the nozzle of a lamp, where the burning oil produced a flame, to which the flame produced by the wooden splint was likened).

Such chemical matches began to be produced in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Some did not make use of phosphorus. One type had a moist mixture including the active chemical potassium chlorate, enclosed in a glass bead at the end of a stick, the whole being wrapped in paper. When the head was broken, the potassium chlorate set the paper on fire. These were called "Promethean matches," from Prometheus, the god in the Greek myths, who had brought fire from the

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Sun to human beings. This was a very slow and messy kind of match, you could well believe.

Another kind of match did not catch fire spontaneously. You had to increase the temperature by striking it; that is, by rubbing it over a rough surface. The friction developed heat, which set the active tip to undergoing a chemical change that caused it to burst into flame. Such "friction matches," made without phosphorus, were called "Lucifer matches" from the Latin word for light-bringer.

Such matches have a minor role in American history. The Americans called them "locofoco matches," partly because "locofoco" seemed to mean "self-lighting" by analogy with "locomotive," which could be looked on as meaning "self-moving," and partly by distortion from "Lucifer."

In 1835 the liberal wing of the Democratic party in New York City was in a hot dispute with the conservative wing. At a party meeting, the conservatives, scenting defeat, put out the lights to end the meeting. The liberals, however, lit candles with their locofocos and continued. After that, for a while the conservative Democrats called the liberals "Locofocos" as an expression of contempt, and the other party, the Whigs, gladly applied the name to all Democrats.

The Lucifer matches, without phosphorus, were hard to strike, and when they finally did catch, they sometimes emitted a shower of sparks that could produce burns in clothes and hands.

In 1831, however, a Frenchman named Charles Sauria produced the first practical friction match containing phosphorus, diluting the active phosphorus with other materials to make sure that the matches didn't start to flame until they were struck. Such matches produced flame quickly and quietly when struck and didn't deteriorate on standing. They eventually put all other varieties of matches out of business.

There was one catch. The phosphorus used in the matches was quite poisonous, and people who worked at producing the matches would get the phosphorus into their bodies, where it caused bone degeneration. They got what was called "phossy jaw," and it killed them, slowly and painfully.

Here, too, there was a peculiar analogy with what happened a century later with radium. The danger of radium and radioactive substances was not appreciated at first, and radium was incorporated in tiny quantities into material that was painted on clock and watch faces to make the numbers and the hands glow in the dark.

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Those who worked in factories with the radium got radiation sickness and died, and the whole thing was finally outlawed. (I remember wearing a radium-painted watch when I was young.)

Fortunately, in 1845 an Austrian chemist, Anton von Schroetter (1802-1875), discovered that if white phosphorus is heated in an atmosphere of nitrogen or carbon dioxide (with which it won't react), its atoms rearrange and it becomes another kind of phosphorus, called, from its color, "red phosphorus."

The advantage of red phosphorus is that it is nontoxic and can be used with relative safety, so that by 1851, Schroetter was producing and recommending red phosphorus matches. However, red phosphorus is not as active as white phosphorus, so that a red phosphorus match is not as easy to strike into flame. For this reason, white phosphorus matches continued to be popular till the end of the century, when they were outlawed. Society, forced to choose between systematic death and a little inconvenience, chose, with its usual delay and reluctance, the inconvenience. Eventually, though, the red phosphorus match heads were chemically juiced up to the point where they were perfectly easy to strike.

The next step was to produce "safety matches." Ordinary matches could be struck on any rough surface, since all the chemicals necessary to produce a chemical action leading to heat and flame were in the matchhead. Accidental lighting — leading to unintended destruction, injuries, and death — might take place.

Suppose, though, that you left out one ingredient from the match head — the red phosphorus, for instance — and placed it on a special strip. The safety match, containing various chemicals, but no phosphorus, will then ignite only if is struck on the strip.

But that's enough for now. I will have more to say about phosphorus next month.

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A proposed marriage can often become the object of controversy. The intended couple's backgrounds are dissimilar; "it just won't work out." In "Olida," Bob Leman ("Instructions," Sept. 1984) tells a dark, intense tale in the Lovecraft tradition. It is a tale of a couple with very dissimilar backgrounds and the peculiar dissolution of their "engagement."

Olida

BY
BOB LEMAN

I go back to town exactly four times a year, to attend the quarterly directors' meetings at the foundry. I have very little to do with my other interests in the county; they have such good managers that there is no need for personal visits on my part. The truth is that I could do the same with the foundry — it is in very capable hands — but there is, I suppose, a trace of sentimentality in my character, and I make these quarterly excursions chiefly for my own pleasure.

After the meeting, Fletcher Hodge said to me, as he always does, "Will you join us for lunch?" and I replied, as I always do, that I would. Fletcher is some sort of relation of mine, as indeed is the whole board except Frank Connors, who is president now, and actually runs things. Lunch would be in the dining room of the Updegraff Hotel, at a big round table that for many years has been an informal meeting place for the men (and, less frequently, the two women) who run the town and the county, and at which, on these occasions, places were saved for the board, even though it meant that some of the regulars had to take their lunches at less exalted boards.

At lunch I sat next to my Aunt Felicia Wagner. She is eighty-five years old now, but still sharp and intimidating. She is the largest stockholder in the foundry, and at her death her shares will go to her son, Richard. We expect this event to result in confusion and discord. My cousin Dick is a strange fellow.

She said, "Where are you staying tonight, Charles?"

"With Jean," I said. I always stay with Jean when I come to town, as Aunt Felicia well knew. Jean is my

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second cousin, a good-looking woman of about my own age, who, in 1951, married a Binford (the Philadelphia, not the Maryland, Binfords) and has kept him more or less as a pet for the past thirty-five years. Tolly Binford rides well, spends a lot of money on clothes, has never worked a day in his life, and hasn't an ounce of brains to bless himself with. Jean adores him, and I've always thought him to be one of the finest men I know. They have five children who were delightful when they were small, and have grown up to be worthy and responsible citizens. These days I find that I am not happy about sleeping away from home, but somehow I find myself looking forward to my quarterly nights at the Binfords'.

So I was not overjoyed when Aunt Felicia said, "I wish you'd change your plans, and stay with me instead. I require your advice." That was Aunt Felicia. *Require.* And of course I had no choice. At sixty I cannot help being as obedient to her as I was at ten. I said, "Of course, Aunt Felicia."

"I dine at seven," she said.

After dinner we took our coffee in her pleasant living room, and she produced a bottle of really exceptional cognac. Uncle Whitlow's fabulous cellar, which I am sure is almost intact (she has done no entertaining since she was widowed), will, like the rest of the estate, in due course become Dick's property. It's a pity. Among Dick's other peculiarities, he is a teetotaler. The treasures that lie down there will go to waste.

We had talked of inconsequential things at dinner, but now she got down to business. "Charles," she said, "I want to talk to you about Richard."

"I see," I said. I was not at all surprised. She has been talking to me about poor Dick for a great many years.

"He plans to get married," she said.

I suppose my mouth dropped open. This time she had surprised me; staggered me, to tell the truth. You have to understand about Dick. He was almost sixty, and I was reasonably certain that he had never in his life had a woman — nor a man, nor anything else, let me hasten to add. Sex appeared to be a matter that simply did not interest him, and had not since his adolescence. I had always vaguely supposed him to be quite sexless, the victim of some unfortunate glandular deficiency; but if that is what it was, it had no physical manifestations that showed. Dick appeared to be a normal male, albeit one who had allowed himself to become somewhat too soft and plump — which is not, after all, an uncommon failing. He was not, in fact, very good looking. He had a pasty complexion, and his pale blue eyes were owlishly magnified by the thick glasses he had to wear. It was a little hard to imagine a woman accepting him.

"Who's the lucky girl?" I said.

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Aunt Felicia looked grim. "A Selkirk," she said.

"A *Selkirk?* Good Lord."

"Yes," she said. "I cannot fathom how it came about — how they met at all. He brought her here once, without asking permission, without inquiring whether or not I wished to meet her. I did not receive them. Richard has not spoken to me since. I suppose it was a mistake. But it was so sudden."

I understood her attitude very well. It was not simply a matter of Dick marrying outside his class; that is not a matter of great moment nowadays, and I don't think that alone would have bothered Aunt Felicia very much. But a Selkirk was another kettle of fish, an entirely different level of undesirability. It was, in fact, totally unacceptable. The word "Selkirk" was almost a generic label in Goster County, a word signifying a person who was not only entirely worthless, but dishonest, sly, and cruel as well. The actual Selkirks were a degenerate tribe who lived indolent, disorderly lives up in the mountains, in and around a ruinous community called Grill's Fork. Everyone was aware of them, of course; it was an ordinary fact of life that the Selkirks were up there, and that they were undesirable citizens, and that Grill's Fork was a place to be avoided by everyone who was not a Selkirk. It had been so for many generations, and no one gave it much thought.

Sometimes there would be an item in the *Herald*, routine news, copied from the blotter by the police reporter: "Hobe Selkirk, Grill's Fork, drunk and disorderly" — or, Okie or Lester or Anselm Selkirk, run in for assault with a deadly weapon, or theft or pill pushing. The young men were almost the only Selkirks seen in town; they would drive down in decrepit pickup trucks, which they loaded with what was apparently the shopping for several families, and, after securing the loads, would make the rounds of the more disreputable bars, drinking boilermakers and swallowing pills. These revels routinely ended in fights and slicings with switchblade knives and police intervention. The Selkirks were unquestionably not the sort of people to be welcomed into the family.

Aunt Felicia said, "I want you to talk to Richard, Charles. Find out how deeply he feels about this — attachment. Perhaps it's only to defy me — to declare his independence. Although if that's what it is, I must say he's left it a bit late. See if there is any way to dissuade him. He will poison the rest of his life if he goes ahead with this. Please do what you can. Please." She was more upset than I could recall having seen her before.

"Of course, Aunt Felicia," I said. "And don't worry. I don't see how he can be serious about this."

"Thank you, Charles. You will stay until it is all settled, won't you?"

She had me trapped. I said, "Of

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course, Aunt Felicia."

Dick had rented a furnished apartment from Zelda Hostetler, the widow of the Protestant undertaker. She had converted the second floor of her big house on Wezel Avenue into an apartment, and furnished it with the discards and culls of her lifelong devotion to redecorating. Dick's six weeks of residence had left conclusive evidence that he was altogether unable to cope with life without someone to take care of him. The place was a sty. Articles of clothing and magazines and newspapers were scattered over the floor and on all the chairs. Every flat surface was loaded with dirty dishes and coffee cups. The ashtrays were precarious pyramids of butts surrounded by a dusting of ash. I said, "Good Lord, Dick, can't Zelda find somebody to clean for you?"

He looked surprised. "Oh. Why, yes. I could do that, couldn't I? I never thought. How about some coffee, Charley?"

I went with him to the kitchen, which was even more disorderly than the front room, and was, moreover, beginning to smell bad. As he clumsily set about making a pot of coffee, I said, "Now then, Dick, what about this plan of yours to get married?"

"I thought that's why you came," he said. "Mother sent you, of course. But I want to talk to you about it, Charley. Maybe you'll understand. I know Mother never will. Let me pour your coffee, and we'll talk." He appeared to have lost weight, and there was no elasticity in his skin, so that his formerly round face was sagging into melancholy bloodhound folds. He was very tense and nervous, his eyes shifty behind the thick lenses. There was a fine tremor in his hands; he slopped coffee into the saucers as he carried it into the living room.

"Charley," he said. "Old Charley. Remember the summers in the old days?"

I did, of course. Dick and I had been best friends as well as cousins in those days. We went to different prep schools, but during the summer we were always together, doing the things boys do. He said, "Remember the motorcycle summer?"

We had low-powered motorcycles the summer we were fifteen, for that one summer only, after which our parents vetoed the machines as too dangerous. We did not object greatly; we were never enthusiasts, and the wheels were simply transportation. The next year, we had our driver's licenses. Dick said, "I want you to remember our trip to Grill's Fork that summer. Remember everything about it."

Our plan that day had been to ride at random over the most derelict roads we could find, following a general direction away from the river and upward into the mountains. It

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was a hot, dry summer, and even the smallest tributary roads were negotiable, though deeply rutted and very dusty. They were crooked and winding as well, and we thought it prudent to leave a mark at every forking, for our guidance on the way home. It was an entirely pleasant outing, the sort of thing that made summers a joy in those days.

Our intention had been to start home after eating the lunch we had packed, but somehow we managed to persuade each other that there was just enough time left to see the far side of one more ridge, and on the far side of that one we found Grill's Fork.

It was about as depressing a hamlet as can be imagined. You must remember that this was 1941, and the nation was only beginning to recover from the Great Depression, so that neglected and run-down buildings were commonplace sights; but I had never before seen an entire village in which every structure, without exception, was so near ruin. There were perhaps two dozen houses scattered on the hillsides abutting the road, all of them the silvery gray color of long-unpainted, weathered wood, all of them sagging and awry, each with its blind windows covering holes in walls or roof. Between the houses, tall weeds flourished. And half hidden among the weeds were ancient, rusty farm machines; broken, wheel-less wagons; a Model A carcass; an inexplicable pair of giant flywheels; piles of cans and bottles; and — among and under all this — a mulch of desiccated hides and bleached small bones of squirrels and rabbits and possums, the garbage of people whose diet runs largely to small game.

We halted at the top of the hill, switched off the bikes, and stood in the sudden silence absorbing the sight of this seedy blot on the summer scenery. "You know what this is?" I said.

"It must be Grill's Fork," Dick said. "Home of the infamous Selkirks."

"Well — shall we pay them a visit?"

We walked the bikes down. At the bottom the road ran almost level and almost straight for a couple of hundred yards, and near the middle of the straight stretch, hugging the road, was an elongated building with a gas pump in front of it. The windowless broad side of it was covered with the only paint visible in the place, an enormous Red Man chewing tobacco sign. "General Store," I said. "Let's get a Coke."

The store had a porch with broken railings across its front, and we went up the two steps and opened the screen door and entered. It took a moment for our eyes to adjust to the dimness; then I spotted the Coca-Cola tank, and at the same time a voice said, "Howdy."

"Hello," we said. The man came out of the gloom at the back of the store. "Help you?" he said. He was a

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small man, shorter than either of us, wearing faded dirty bib overalls and a soiled starched white shirt. "Couple of Cokes," I said. Dick had already pulled them out of the tank. I handed the storekeeper a dime. "That'll be twenty cents," he said.

"What?" I said. "A dime apiece for Cokes?"

"That's the price," he said. I paid him. I suppose I was somewhat intimidated. He was a very ugly little man, with a nose like a blade, a thin-lipped sour mouth crowded with crooked teeth, very pale eyes, and a short, dense mat of red hair. It was, as we soon discovered, the Selkirk face. They were an inbred lot, and every one of them that I ever saw wore some recognizable variation of that face.

"Guess I haven't seen you boys before," he said.

"No, I guess not," I said. "We're from Sturkeyville."

"Figured you was," he said. "What's your names?"

We told him. He said, "Howdy do. I'm Selkirk. Calvin. What you boys doin' up here?"

"Just riding our bikes," Dick said. "Seeing the county. This is the first time we've been here. This *is* Grill's Fork, isn't it?"

"Grill's Fork," Selkirk said. "You want anything else?"

The screen door slammed, and a girl came in. She was older than we were, eighteen perhaps, and, as I instantly saw, perfectly ripe. She wore a too-tight, too-short gingham dress, and perhaps nothing else; she filled the garment to overflowing, breasts and haunches softly and richly straining the thin cloth. She was barefoot, and dirty.

"Half a pounda baloney, Cal," she said. She looked at us. "Well. Who you fellas?"

We were struck dumb. Fifteen is a troublesome age for a boy, or at least it was in those days. An infusion of hormones is changing the lad's body, filling him with urgent needs that he sees no chance of satisfying, driving him toward girls who somehow, and as if by magic, have acquired a perfect social ease that no doubt gives way in privacy to superior laughter at the antics of the pimpled gawks who diffidently and clumsily pursue them. We were scared of girls almost as much as we wanted them. And this was an older girl — a woman, really.

She said, "Well, speak up. What's your names?"

We told her. "I'm Olida," she said. "Olida Selkirk. We're all Selkirks here." She had the face, all right, but sufficiently softened and blunted to make her face almost attractive; and on her the red hair, although it was visibly dirty, was magnificent. But of course we had only passing attention for her face; the toothsome body fascinated us as a snake fascinates a rabbit.

"You boys come up to see how

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the hillbillies live, that it?" she said.

We muttered incoherent denials. She said, "Why, come on. I'll show you around. Not that there's much of anything you ain't seen already."

She picked up her package and went out. We followed, as docile as sheep. In my case, at least, the docility had contradictory causes: first, the blatant sexualty that so stirred my untried maleness that, at that moment, her wish was quite literally my command; and second, my ingrained obedience to the orders of female elders, fostered by my mother and aunts and schoolteachers. Olida was at once an object of desire and an adult woman.

She turned to the right, and we scuffed through the dust beside her, one on each side, an arrangement we arrived at only after some embarrassing milling about. I thought I saw her smile at our ineptness, and it rendered me utterly tongue-tied for a time. Not that Dick was much better, but he managed monosyllabic replies as she gave us the tour, which consisted of pointing out houses and giving us the names of the Selkirks who dwelt in them.

At the end of the straight stretch, the road turned and brought us into sight of a house that had been hidden by the hillside. It was a much larger house than any of the others; the central part of it was built of yellowish stone, and there were very extensive clapboard additions. The wooden part was as weathered as the rest of the houses in the place, and appeared to have been built around the middle of the last century. The stone part looked much older. "That's where I live," she said. "Come on up."

Once more we went from brilliant sunshine into a dim interior. She closed the door behind us, and for a moment I could see nothing at all; then, as my eyes adjusted, I was able to make out most of the details of the shadowy room: shuttered windows with rotting draperies, bulky chairs disgorging stuffing, a fireplace with some sort of picture hanging above it and dime-store trinkets on the mantelpiece. There was a small fire burning, even on this hot summer day; and, in a high-backed chair drawn close to the fire, was a small, hunched figure. "My Granny," Olida said, and then, raising her voice: "I brought company, Granny."

The old woman's head lifted, and she peered at us. "Ah," she said in a tremulous old voice. "Aha. Company. We'll want tea, Olida."

"You'll have to drink a cup of tea," Olida whispered, and then, aloud: "I'll go fix it, Granny. You boys sit down."

We took chairs, and she went out. We sat in silence, waiting for the old woman to speak. After a while she said, "What's your names, boys?" We told her. "And what's your fathers' names?" We told her that. "Ah. Aha. I know *of* your fathers, boys. Well-

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known names in town there. And here you are in Grill's Fork, come to take tea with Aunt Rhody. That's what everybody calls me except Olida. I'm her granny. Aha."

There was silence again for a time, and then Olida came in with the tea, a very odd-tasting brew, with no milk, sugar, or lemon. Manners required that I drink it, however unpalatable, and I did so, although my gorge rose a bit.

And that was all. I rose suddenly from my chair in Dick's messy living room and began to pace, realizing suddenly that my last memory of that day was drinking Aunt Rhody's tea. I suppose I had never before tried to remember the day in its entirety, although the decrepit hamlet and its grubby siren Olida had certainly been recollected from time to time. But, try as I might, whatever happened after I drank the tea would not return to memory.

"This is weird, Dick," I said. "Really strange. You know, I can't remember a thing after we drank that tea."

"I thought you probably couldn't," Dick said. "That day was the start of — that day was the start. I'll have to tell you about it. You won't understand what's going on now if I don't."

I said, "What's really odd is that I don't remember forgetting. You know, why didn't it worry me the next day? I can't remember even thinking about it. I tell you, it's crazy."

"The whole thing is crazy," Dick said. "Crazier than you think. And, well, the fact is —" He broke off, took a deep breath, and said, in a voice that was shaking, "The fact is, it's pretty awful, Charley, and I don't know what I'm going to do."

The day had turned queer for Dick with the drinking of the tea, just as it had for me, but in a quite different way. "You fell asleep, Charley, right there in the chair. I was going to wake you up, but the old woman said, "Oh, let him snooze. You two run along," and Olida said, "Sure, let him sleep, Dick. You come with me."

She took him by the hand and led him out of the room, not through the front door and out into the summer afternoon, but back deeper into the house, through dim rooms full of decayed furniture and disquieting smells, and up an astonishingly handsome wide staircase, and then up a narrow, crooked one, and down a narrow, airless hallway to a door that opened into a dark room. There had been something in Dick's tea, too, but a different dose from mine. He was perfectly conscious throughout the whole thing, and remembered it all clearly enough afterward, but in retrospect it had the quality of a dream, something impossible clearly remembered. And he was without a will of his own: he would do whatever she told him to do, and could do nothing without her instructions.

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From inside the room came a powerful stench and a slow, regular rasp pitched on two levels, the sound of breathing, of some huge thing inhaling and exhaling there in the blackness. "It's my very-great grandpa," Olida said to Dick, and then, into the room: "I brought Dick Wagner, Grandpa."

The giant breathing paused, and an enormously deep, slow, phlegmy voice said, "Put him inside the room, Olida."

"Go in," she said. "Don't make a sound." Dick obeyed.

He stood just inside the door, baffled, trying to see into the darkness and failing. He did not, he said, feel an appropriate degree of fear, not even when the immense, apparently boneless hand, as big as a ham and as soft and cold and inelastic as curds in a cheesecloth, settled on his shoulder. He stood, and the clotted, rumbling voice said, "Yes. All right, Olida," and she said, "Come," and he left the room.

She led him out of the house and across a small meadow and up a ladder to the loft of a barn, where sunlight slanted in through gaps in the siding and lay in yellow bars on the hay. She said, "I'm going to show you how, Dickie boy. Do you want to learn?" and unbuttoned her dress.

They were in the loft for a couple of hours, Dick said, and she did indeed teach him how. There were three passages, the first instantly completed on his part, the second more creditable, and the third of quite considerable duration. He was a tired and pleased young man when they descended the ladder.

"We came back to the house then," Dick said, "and you were still asleep in the chair. The old woman stood up — if you could call it standing up; she was so tiny and bent over that she wasn't much more than waist-high — and went over to you and said, 'Charley, you're not going to remember this. You're not going to remember it at all. Now wake up.' And you woke up, and we started home.

"She told you you wouldn't remember, and of course you didn't. And Olida said something to me as we came back across the meadow, and that was true, too. She said, 'You're mine now, Dickie boy. Mine and nobody else's. You can't do that with anybody but me.' It sounded like love talk, but what it was, was a curse. It was exactly true. I can't do that with anybody but her. To this day."

That explained a lot. I said, "Jesus, Dick. You mean that was the only time you ever — that that was your only time?"

"Oh no," he said. "No. I wish to God it had been. But that's not how it is at all, in spite of what you — and, I suppose, everybody else — think. No, I've been active enough. Ever since that day I've been up there pretty regularly. And I'm fine with Olida. It's

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just that it doesn't work with anybody else. And of course that's why I never married."

"But now you want to," I said.

He stared at me with his sad dog's eyes; the tremulous hands picked at the buttons of his blazer. He said, "Oh, come on now, Charley. You know better than that. *She* wants to. And those — things want us to. And right now I don't see any way out of it."

"Things? You mean the Selkirks?"

"Sure, the Selkirks," he said. "Some of them aren't human at all, Charley, did you know that?"

I let that pass. I said, "Dick, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do. If you don't want to marry her, don't. Why does she want to get married, all of a sudden, after all these years, anyhow?"

"Well, money, of course. That's part of it. Mother's eighty-five, after all. But the main thing is to keep the Very Great alive. I've been chosen for that. But it's not time, yet. They want to set it up so Olida can keep an eye on me all the time. Ever since we went up there that day, Charley, I've been — well, kind of a slave. In their control. Those drugs of theirs. Like what you drank in the tea, which made you forget. And what I've been drinking pretty regularly since. I tell you, when I think about her, my flesh creeps. But when she wants me up there, I go. I can't help myself. She says that when we're married, we'll live up there. I can build a house if I want to, she says, or move in with her and Aunt Rhody. You remember the house, Charley? It hasn't changed at all. It's just exactly the same as it was that day. Except that they've had to knock out another wall, to accommodate the Very Great."

"The Very Great." A slave. Moving to Grill's Fork, for God's sake. Insanity. Dick appeared really to believe it all, but that was a matter to be covered later, by a psychiatrist. Right now the first order of business was to extricate him from the current mess. I said, "Dick, let's go up there right now. You just tell her it's all off. I'll be there for moral support. You could give her some money, I suppose. Cast-off mistress and all that. What do you say?"

He gave me the dog stare again. "You don't understand, Charley. You don't understand a thing. I tell you I *can't*. Any more than I can fly. I do what she tells me."

"All right, then. I'll go by myself."

"If you want to, Charley. Right now I'll grab any straw. I don't think there's a thing you can do, though."

But I thought there was; there had to be. I simply could not abide the thought of that rat-faced tribe in Aunt Felicia's elegant house after her death, or of a Selkirk sitting at the round table at the Updegraff when they got control of Dick's stock, which I thought they certainly would. As you see, at that time I was thinking of them

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as Snopeses — an idea that in the event turned out to be quite wide of the mark.

Dick said, "If you're going up there, Charley, take somebody with you. They're capable of anything."

"I will," I said. Tolly Binford was the very man. He was in first-class shape for a man of sixty, and while I couldn't quite take seriously the possibility of violence, it would unquestionably be comforting to have Tolly with me, especially if he decided to take a gun, which I rather thought he would.

"I'll go up tomorrow," I told Dick. "I'll see if Tolly can go with me."

I needed information on the Selkirks from a less prejudiced observer than Dick before I set out on my mission, and I stopped at Frank Polder's house. Frank is principal at East High School, and unofficial county historian. He also is a cousin of some sort.

Frank pulled at his pipe and said, "You'll want to check with the sheriff and the police, Charley. They're probably pretty much up-to-date on the Selkirks. But it happens that I do know something about them. Are you aware that they're the oldest family in the county?"

I certainly had not known that. They are not the kind of people one thinks of as "old family." I said, "How far back do they go, Frank?"

"Well, they were here before the county became a jurisdiction, and quite a while before," he said. "When Forbes took Fort Duquesne and renamed it Fort Pitt in 1758, one of his scouts, a pretty far-ranging fellow, it seems, included the name of Selkirk among the scattering of settlers in the surrounding hundred miles who had survived the depredations of the French and the Indians. That's the earliest documented date we have on them. But a 1775 entry in the Shaftoe diaries describes the Selkirk house (the stone portion of the present house) as appearing to be at least a hundred years old on that date. That would put the Selkirks here before anybody but Indians. The paterfamilias, who gave his name to Shaftoe as Ashmole Selkirk, said he built the house himself, and that was what led Shaftoe to note the apparent age of the house. He thought Selkirk was lying, that the house was too old for him to have built. He also thought that Selkirk's large family was 'marvelous ugly.' Evidently they carried the face even then.

"In 1791 Ashmole Selkirk received a patent to something over two thousand acres 'on the waters of Grill's Fork of Big Scander Creek.' That covers all the land that makes up the settlement of Grill's Fork today. From that time on, the name appears pretty often in the recorder's books. Not to speak of the police records. Apparently the head of the clan is always in direct descent from the original Ashmole Selkirk; at any rate the owner of the big house and most of the land

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has always been an Ashmole. Is now, as a matter of fact.

"Very odd people, Charley. They carry clannishness to an extreme degree. I checked the marriage register awhile back, and with only eight exceptions, every Selkirk marriage has been to another Selkirk. Those young men who come to town to raise hell seem to be very ordinary young thugs — a little meaner than most, I suppose, and certainly uglier than most — but by the time they're in their middle twenties, they stop visits to town altogether. Most curious. Of course, they've been inbreeding up there for three hundred years or more. I don't know of actual criminal activity beyond fighting with knives down on Front Street, but over the years there've been a number of lost or benighted travelers who had the bejesus scared out of them when they stopped in Grill's Fork to ask for directions or help. I've often wondered whether there were others who never made it to town to tell about it. Why are you interested in the Selkirks at this late date, anyway?"

I said, "Just curious. Dick and I were talking about a trip up there we made back before the war, and I suddenly got to wondering about the Selkirks."

"A lot of people wonder about them, Charley," he said.

Tolly Binford relished the idea of an excursion up to the hamlet, and he was shocked to the bottom of his simple, decent soul when I told him about Dick's enslavement to a mountain trull. He quoted Kipling about the fool that there was. Kipling is the only poetry Tolly knows, bless his heart. "Of course Dick can't be altogether in his right mind," he said, "however much she's used her wiles. A bachelor keeping a mistress is one thing, but marrying a woman like that —"

"You have to remember that they've had this going for a good long time, Tolly. Years and years. It started before either you or I was married."

That rather tickled Tolly. "Old Dick. Who'd have believed it?' Then, more seriously, he said, "What would you think of my taking a gun along, Charley?"

"Why don't you?" I said.

The next day a whole series of irritating small crises and minor hitches conspired to delay our departure, and the sun was low in the sky by the time we pulled into Grill's Fork. Tolly parked in front of the store, and I got out and surveyed the village. It appeared to me that not a building had been erected since my last visit, almost half a century before, nor had any of the old ones disappeared. There they squatted, quite unchanged, still unpainted, still decrepit and disreputable, still with an air of abandoned buildings occupied by squatters who would best be left undisturbed. In-

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stead of lawns there were fields of weeds, as there had been then, but the junk among the weeds provided a touch of modern times: now it was rusty car bodies and those of pickup trucks, old refrigerators and stoves, and heaps of worn-out tires. The piles of cans and bottles looked the same, though.

The storekeeper could have been that same Calvin Selkirk that Dick and I had first encountered, but probably wasn't. "Olida?" he said. "Up in the big house. Just around the bend."

I remembered where it was. Tolly and I walked along the road — asphalt now, instead of dust — and came around the cheek of the hill, and there it was, yellow stone and weathered wood, sealed and shuttered and, as it seemed to me, watchful, attentive, and menacing.

Tolly was not bothered by such introspective reservations, and he stepped right along, slashing at the weeds with the stick he always carries in the country, commenting in his loud, cheerful voice on the drainage pattern he thought he discerned. We went in single file, because the path from the road to the house was surrendering to the weeds, and I was glad to have Tolly trampling them ahead of me.

I knocked on the door and, when nothing happened, knocked again. The door opened, and there was Olida. Or no; her daughter or perhaps her granddaughter. And then she spoke and said, "Why, hello, Charley," and of course it was Olida, shockingly unchanged by the relentless years, still the voluptuous slattern of 1941, still vaguely superior and condescending. I said, "Olida?" and then: "Hello, Olida. This is Tolly Binford."

"Oh, I know who he is," she said. "The big golfer and fund-drive chairman. Ha. And you fellas come up to pry Dick loose from my awful clutches. Well, come on in."

The room had not changed either; there was the same shuttered gloom, the same undefinable faint unpleasant smell, the same small figure hunched in the chair by the fire. Of course it could not be the same old woman; that one had been ancient in 1941. But when she rose and took a couple of steps toward us, tiny and bent almost double, I would almost have sworn it was she. She said, "Howdy, Charley. Tolly. Sit down, boys."

It had to be the same woman; who else could be old enough to call a pair of sixty-year-olds "boys"? She had been very old the first time I had seen her, and she must by now be coeval with those purported 150-year-olds the Soviets trot out from time to time to demonstrate the salubrity of Leninist governance. But logic suggested that old Selkirk women looked as much like each other as young ones did.

The boys sat down. The crone said, "I know what you come for, and

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I tell you right off the bat, you're wastin' your time. It's a cruel thing you're tryin' to do, to separate these young lovers, and I'll not stand for it. Happy as two birds, they are, and you two villains sneakin' around tryin' to spoil things for 'em. I'll not have it."

Tolly looked at me and winked, and I came close to grinning myself. The old girl's effrontery was almost engaging. I said, "Well now, Mrs. Selkirk, I think maybe that's something for Olida and Dick to decide, don't you? We've talked to Dick, and now we'd like to talk to Olida about it. Uh — privately, if you don't mind."

"Mind?" she said. "Why should I mind? Olida knows her own mind. You and her go and talk, Charley. Tolly'll stay here and keep me company."

I looked at Olida, and she nodded and rose. I said, "Remember that you're driving, Tolly." It was a none too subtle warning about drinking their damned tea. Tolly said, "Right," and I saw that he understood.

She led me through the door and up the broad stairs to the second floor, and then down an almost pitch-black hallway and into a room where just enough light came through the shutters for me to see her white face in the dimness. She said, "We can talk here, Charley. There's something I've got to say to you."

"Now's the time," I said. "And I've got — *there's somebody in here!*" I had heard a sound out of the shadows, a wheeze or a gasp or a groan.

"Sure," she said. "It's Anse. Don't worry about him. He can't move at all anymore, and his mind's been gone for forty, fifty years. Don't even eat no more. We can talk here."

I was very sure that I did not want to be in the same room as Anse. "Let's go to a different room," I said.

"No use," she said. "There's somebody in every room. Worse'n Anse, most of 'em. And Anse can't understand us, or talk. Now here's what I want to tell you, Charley. Dick's wrong about me. All of you have got it all wrong. I truly mean Dick no harm. If he don't want to marry me, why that's all right. We been lovers for a right long time, and it'd be nice to be married. But not if he don't want it. I guess you know I got a spell on him that I work with the tea, but sometimes it wears off, and he comes back anyhow. He really does love me, you know, Charley. If it wasn't that he's a Wagner and I'm a Selkirk, he'd have married me long ago. But let that go. I honest and truly love him, and I'll help him to have things the way he wants them. None of this was my idea. All of it was the Very Great's orders. I didn't have no choice. But I'm — I'm ready now. Ready to disobey. Just this once. For Dick."

She was speaking very quietly, almost in a whisper, and she sounded sincere and distressed and urgent. I tried to make out the expression on the face floating there in the shadow.

Out of the darkness, suddenly and

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shockingly, there came a hoarse, clotted voice: "Shame on you, Olida. I heard that. I reckon you'll be punished for that."

She made an odd sound of surprise and fear. "Anse! But you can't talk anymore. You can't even understand talk."

"Ah. Ah." It was a noise something like laughter. "That's what you all thought. I just ain't had nothin' to say for quite a while. But now I have. Sooner or later somebody'll come in here, and I'll tell. You're in a bad scrape, Olida. I'll tell."

She whispered to me, "I'm done for. They'll fix me good for this. The Very Great thinks up some awful things. Lordy. I'm a goner."

Now to tell the truth, I was at this point considerably shaken. I'm no more timid than the next man, but the darkness and the cryptic jabber and the generally spooky atmosphere of the place were getting under my skin. I said — and I found that I was whispering, too — "Come on, Olida, let's get out of here. If you're afraid of them, we'll take you back to town. You'll be all right. We can finish our talk later. Come on. Let's go."

"All right," she said. "Yes. I'll go. If they let me. Us."

She took my hand and led me out of the room. Behind us the voice said, "One of these days somebody'll come in, and I'll tell, Olida."

In the front room, Tolly and the old woman were sitting as we had left them. I said, "Come on, Tolly, we're leaving." He jumped up with alacrity. "O.K.," he said. "I'm ready. Good-bye Mrs. Selkirk."

The crone did not answer him; she spoke to Olida: "Where do you think you're goin', girl?"

"Charley, let's go," Olida said. "Quick." We went out the front door, Tolly following. The old woman's voice screeched after us, "Olida, you come back here. Right now."

I half expected that we'd be interfered with on our way to the car, since it was dark now, and our way through the weeds was slow, but we reached it without incident, barring a few stumbles. Tolly accelerated out of Grill's Fork with a spinning of wheels and a roar.

In the car I said, "Where can you go in town, Olida?"

"I got no place," she said, "except maybe with Dick."

"Well, we'll see if he'll have you," I said.

When Dick opened the door for us, he stared incredulously at Olida for a moment, and then they grabbed each other and kissed in a famished way. After a little while, Dick raised his head and said, "What happened? Why did you bring her?"

I said, "It seems that she's on your side now. She was scared to stay up there. Will you put her up?"

"Of course," he said. He appeared to think I was insane to have asked such a question. "Good," I said. "And

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now that we have the two of you here, Tolly and I have a few questions. First off, what's this 'Very Great' that you keeping talking about?"

They looked at each other. Dick said, "It's old Ashmole Selkirk."

"Ah," I said. "The head of the clan."

"Well, yes," he said, "but not just that. It's *the* Ashmole Selkirk. The one and only. The original."

"The one who built the house?"

"The one who built the house."

"I see. And he's — how old?"

Dick sighed. "You don't believe it. And I don't blame you. But it's true. Nobody knows how old he is. He was here before the white man came, probably long before. The Indians thought he was a ghost, or a god, or something else supernatural, and of course they were right. Except maybe *unnatural* is a better word. Anyhow, he doesn't die, and he keeps on growing. But he's human at the bottom, or at least he's based on a human being. For a long time he was able to breed children with various women, so he clearly isn't a different species — or wasn't, anyway, in the beginning. What he is now is anybody's guess. But it's not hard to picture what he looked like when he was still human. Just have a look at any Selkirk face.

"The unnatural gene or whatever it is doesn't hit every Selkirk in every generation. It seems to be a random thing. Sometimes it just arrests aging for a very long time — like Olida here. More often you get freaks, Selkirks who are normal for twenty or thirty years, and then suddenly begin to eat enormously and start to grow again. They'll do that for forty or fifty or sixty years, until they weigh a ton and a half, or more. They can't move at all, of course, and apparently their brains go bad. At some point they stop eating. They'll have stopped talking some time before. In fact, they've stopped everything except just being alive.

"And they stay alive that way for a long, long time, living, I guess, on the ton or more of fat or flesh they've acquired. They shrink as the years go by, growing smaller and smaller until there's only a little black thing left, smaller than a cat. The bones must be used up as nourishment, along with the fat and muscle. At some point the little black thing becomes as hard as a block of wood, and that's how they can tell that it's dead. Then they stick it in the ground under a gravestone that was set out a century or two before, when that particular Selkirk began to change.

"But old Ashmole doesn't shrink, and he doesn't die; he just grows and grows. And eats, every century or so. And what he eats extends his life for — well, I suppose a century. What he eats is a person. It's not mastication and swallowing and digestion, though. I imagine his innards don't bear any resemblance to the human digestive

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apparatus. What he does, he enfolds the poor soul he's having for dinner, and absorbs him into some crease or crack in that mountain of a body of his. It's possible that there's a kind of mental assimilation, along with the physical absorption. That may even be the essence of it — absorption of some sort of life-force, along with the physical nourishment.

"And that's the story of the Selkirks, and now you're free to call me crazy. But Olida will bear me out — for what that's worth — and I imagine you've both seen enough up there with your own eyes to persuade you to some degree."

Dick had been in dead earnest throughout this rigmarole, and Olida had nodded agreement as he spoke. The two of them seemed to believe it, at any rate, and there most certainly had been some strange goings-on up there at Grill's Fork that I'd seen myself. All that being said, however, the story was a bit too rich for easy-digestion by an elderly skeptic, and, when considered, about as credible as flying saucers or astrology. I seemed to have two looners on my hands now, instead of one. But the question I finally asked was far from deep or probing, and indeed was only to satisfy a minor puzzle that had nagged at me from time to time since this nonsense began. "Why do you call him the 'Very Great'?" I said.

"Well now, that one's easy," Olida said. "Every one of us is descended from him. He's our great, great, who-knows-how-many-times-great grandpa. So we just call him 'Very Great.'"

I nodded gravely, as though this greatly increased my understanding, and said, "It's late, and I need my sleep. Will you two be all right?"

Olida said, "Oh yes," and Dick looked bruised and desperate for a moment, and then Olida took his hand, and he said, "Oh yes, sure. We'll be fine."

I thought about that as Tolly drove us back to Aunt Felicia's house. "Tolly," I said, "did Dick seem to you to be really convinced that they'd be fine?"

"Why no," Tolly said. "Of course not. She's got him like a snake gets a rabbit. He's scared to death, but when she's there, he's hypnotized. You never did ask the main question. You know what Dick's so scared of, don't you?"

Good old Tolly, getting right to the root of the matter. I said, "Yes, I know, Tolly. He thinks he's scheduled to be the next meal of the Very Great. And I gather that Olida thinks so, too. I wonder if Binky and Fred would put him up at their place in the islands for a few months, until he gets over this."

"He wouldn't go, Charley. Olida is your true designing woman, and she has him fast in her toils." Tolly tends toward an old-fashioned style of discourse on the rare occasions that he permits his feelings to show.

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"You know, Tolly, I've been wondering," I said. "Do you suppose the law would have any objection if we were to go up there and let some light and air into that house?"

"Darn good idea. A little direct action. Why don't we visit Dutch Hyde tomorrow, and kind of delicately feel him out?"

"Why not, indeed?" I said.

Dutch Hyde is the sheriff, a garrulous man who has held the office for thirty years now. We played baseball together when we were boys. He said, "Well, if you're asking about criminal activity, you don't want to see me — the chief of police is your man. He's the one that snags the young Selkirks when they come to town and bust things up. When there's a warrant for them, then I go up — or send a deputy, more often — and bring the perpetrator back to the county jail here. Now, the fact is that they mostly behave in a law-abiding way. When we go up there to arrest one of the boys, there's never a speck of trouble. The perpetrator is always waiting in front of the store, clean clothes on and his clean socks and shaving gear in a little tin suitcase, and he climbs in the car as docile as you please. There's generally one or two of 'em serving a little time down at the pen.

"Beyond that, I got nothing but suspicions — or anyhow, I haven't got anything that will stand up enough to get a warrant and stir 'em up a little. But fellas, I know — I *know* — there's something mighty wrong up there, even if I don't know what it is. There's some incest up there, I'm pretty sure of that, but they keep it pretty close amongst themselves, and there's never been a complaint. And there's probably a still or two, back in a hollow somewhere, but that's for the feds. They pay their taxes, and they haven't got any neighbors close enough to make complaints. But there's been three unsolved disappearances in my time in office, and for one reason and another, I think it was the Selkirks who were responsible. But I still haven't got enough to get a warrant to roust 'em. But I'd sure value a chance to search that house."

"We've been in it, Dutch," I said.

He looked astonished. "Well, by God. You're the first outsiders I ever heard of gettin' inside. What was it like?"

"Odd. Very odd. We think there's something wrong, too. We kind of thought we might go up there and nose around a little, just as public-spirited citizens. If we were to find anything, we'd let you know, of course. And we understand that you are opposed to this sort of action, and discourage it."

"Damn right I do," Hyde said. "And I'm going to discourage my Deputy Bevins about going with you."

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The trouble was that we'd have to wait until dark. I can't say I was very happy about that, but I took some comfort in the fact that Bevins would be with us. He was a large, athletic young man who would no doubt have been a brawler if he had not been a law officer. I thought he could protect us if anybody could.

Olida wanted to come with us. I did not want her to. For all that she had defied her family and had run away from them, I still had reservations about the sincerity of her change of heart. My aim was to free Dick of the hold she had over him, and clearly the answer to that was up in the big house. If we took Olida with us, she would be in a position to cross us at any time. I didn't like it.

But Tolly took her side. He was, first of all, persuaded that she was sincere; and beyond that, he said, we would not only need advice on the best way to approach and enter the house, but guidance within it after we had entered. I tend to trust Tolly's judgment in matters like that, and although I held out for a while, I finally agreed that she should come along. Thus there were four of us who set out for Grill's Fork that evening.

We were undertaking a wholly illegal — and indeed, a vigilante — expedition; but with Olida's company we might — however implausibly — claim that we had entered by invitation. Tolly and Bevins were armed. All four of us carried powerful flashlights from the sheriff's supply room. At 11:00 P.M. we arrived at a convenient parking place on the far side of the ridge from the village, and set off on foot in the warm night.

The settlement below was wholly dark; there was not a light to be seen in any building. Olida led us off the road and along a hillside path that circled the houses and brought us at last to a position above and behind the big house. The moon gave rather more light than was desirable for our purposes, but Olida assured us that every soul in Grill's Fork who could move was by this time sound asleep. We descended as quietly as possible to the shadows behind the barn, and cautiously inched around the building to survey our target.

The house loomed black and — in my edgy view — menacing above us. Olida whispered, "Do you see the cellar door?" I saw it; it was one of those double doors lying sloped above a stairway down to a door in the wall. She said, "That's how we'll go in. I'll scoot over to the house and make sure everything's quiet, and open the door. I'll motion you that it's safe to run across, and I'll duck in after you."

She raced through the weeds as silently as a shadow, and noiselessly raised the halves of the door. She took up a position against the wall of the house and gestured. We approached as quietly as we could, Bevins in the lead, then Tolly, and I in the rear. We crept down the stairs, and

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Bevins cautiously pushed open the door at the foot. He flashed his light around the room and said, "Empty room. Nobody here." He stepped inside.

I heard Olida say softly, "Are you all inside?"

Tolly and I still stood outside the door, but I said, "Yes. All in."

And then she yelled, a shocking noise in the silence we had so carefully maintained. She yelled, *"How do you like this, you nosy sons of bitches?"* I froze for a moment. Then I stuck my head above ground level and, after a second of puzzlement, made out what she was doing; she was hauling with all her might at a rope that hung out of a hole in the wall. There was an appalling, thunderous, rolling noise, and with it a cloud of dust that billowed out of the room a yard away. Tolly and I turned to flee up the stairs, but in that instant the import of her words sank in, and I pushed him back.

The room was a deadfall, a trap no doubt set long ago by early Selkirks who were quite aware that every man's hand was against them. Olida had set us up. The rope she had pulled tripped the apparatus, and a couple of tons of rock had fallen upon poor Bevins. She had, obviously, intended it for all three of us. I peeked over the side again. She had disappeared. No doubt she thought she'd got us all.

I flashed my light through the doorway; nothing was visible but dust settling upon a roomful of fallen rock. I was shaking pretty violently, and I thought I was going to be sick. Tolly sat on a step with his head in his hands, and I leaned against the wall, trying to get control of my stomach.

After a couple of minutes, Tolly said, "We'll have to find another way in," and his matter-of-fact readiness to get on with the job steadied me considerably. I said, "Yes," and then: "Why don't we just try the front door? Everybody's got to be awake by now"

The front door stood open; no doubt Olida had gone in that way. I examined the room in the glare of my flashlight. Without its shroud of darkness, it looked only soiled and threadbare and grubby now, and not at all sinister. The tiny crone sat in her chair, not moving, not looking at us. We hurried past her and into the next room.

There we had our first look at an old, changed Selkirk. It was another large room, and across it was an arched doorway that I saw led to the great stairway. There was a good deal of furniture in the room, all of it covered with cobwebs and dust; in one corner stood a rotting square piano. In the opposite corner was something large and pale that squirmed and heaved in the beams of light, a great, flaccid heaping of soft white flesh, resembling nothing so much as a ton or two of lard dropped in a gob from a modest height. But lard with a

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certain amount of muscular tissue remaining within it, enough muscle to permit the sluggish heavings that indicated a foredoomed effort to escape the torturing light. I retched, and I think Tolly did, too.

We ran through the arched door and up the stairway, our feet pounding dust out of the raveled runner that covered it. It gave into a broad hallway with a number of doors on both sides. I said, panting, "Which one's to the attic stairs, d'you think?" Tolly flashed his light around. "That one," he said. He was right. It was a steep, narrow stairway, and the hall at the top was narrow as well, and festooned with the usual cobwebs. "That'll be it," Tolly said. "That door there." He snatched it open, and we both pointed our lights.

The thing filled the room from floor to ceiling and, as far as I could tell, from wall to wall. Tolly and I leaped backward, and simultaneously the wall of white flesh creased and recoiled where the light struck it. We stood frozen.

A voice spoke from somewhere deep in the mass, a powerful basso profundo that would have been theatrically rich but for the clotted, sticky manner of its enunciation. It said, "Pray, gentlemen, extinguish the light. It causes me excessive pain, and serves no purpose here."

"My God," Tolly said. "My God. It talks."

"'It'?" the voice said. "Please have the goodness, Mr. Binford, to use the masculine pronoun in speaking of me. I am not an animal or an object. The light, if you please."

We pointed the lights at the floor, and the voice said, "Thank you. Now. To what do I owe this intrusion?"

"First time I ever talked to a roomful of lard," Tolly muttered. I think he was trying to buck himself up. He needed it if he was half as scared as I was. I said, shakily, "Do I address Ashmole Selkirk?"

"Your servant, sir," the voice said. "I already know your names, of course. What do you want of me, that you intrude into my house without invitation?"

I took a deep breath, and said, in as steady and assured a voice as I could manage, "I'll tell you what we want. We want you — people to release Dick Wagner. He is not going to marry Olida, and he is not going to be your next meal. He is to be let go at once." It was a very strange feeling, to be shouting at a mountain of inert flesh and to stand in the expectation of a reply. It was, in fact, so strange that I could not quite grasp the reality of it, and it seemed much like a dream. That, I suppose, was the reason I had not incontinently bolted, as any reasonable man would have done at that point.

"Upon my word, sir, you puzzle me," the creature rumbled. "I know of no compulsion upon your Mr. Wagner, except perhaps his affection for

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my descendant. Your rude incursion has been made entirely on the basis of a false assumption. I now direct you to leave these premises, as quickly as may be."

"Damn you!" I shouted. "Damn you to hell! You've got him drugged, enslaved to Olida. I want him released. *Now.*"

"Or what, sir?" it said. "What will you do if I do not comply with these noisy demands?"

"*This*," I said. I pointed my light through the doorway, and, a moment later, so did Tolly.

Again there was a ponderous recoil of the wall of flesh under the battering of the light. It hurt the thing, no doubt about that. I felt a vindictive satisfaction, and then, almost instantly, abject fear. From the creature's side the flesh extended itself into a long, questing, boneless arm, a thing like a thick rope that moved with the swiftness of a whip. It snatched the flashlight from my hand and smashed it against the wall, shattering it. Tolly cried, "Jesus! It can move! Run, Charley!"

We spun around. Tolly's light sent a white beam down the narrow hall, and there, filling it all the way back to the door to the stairs, was a crowd of Selkirks, pale and rat-faced and red-haired, silently waiting. Tolly said, "Good Lord." We moved slowly toward them, simply because there seemed to be nothing else to do. None of them had weapons, and there was no expression at all on their faces, so we had no idea of their intentions. They looked dangerous, though.

There was a stir at the back of the crowd, and I saw Olida pushing her way through. She made her way to the front and said, "All right, you two. You come with me now. Damned old fools. You could have been killed. The Very Great hasn't been that stirred up for years. You been lucky."

"But isn't that what you want, Olida?" I said. "You already tried to kill us once. And you did kill Bevins." She had rescued us from the crowd, but for what? I was thinking in terms of frying pans and fires.

"Now I got a better idea," she said. She turned and faced the crowd of Selkirks. "All right, you all go back to your houses now. It's all right. I'll take care of it." As silently as they had stolen upon us, they slipped back down the stairs. Olida called back into the room, "You got any orders, Grandpa?" There was no reply from the monster. "Let's go downstairs," she said.

There were no lights of any kind in the house, except for the small fire in the front room where the old woman sat. As we were descending by the light of the flash, I testily said something about the difficulties of so dark a place, to which she replied, "Oh, those of us who still have eyes can see pretty good in the dark. And the changed ones can't stand light at all."

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My chief desire at the moment was to get out of that house as quickly as possible, and clearly Tolly felt the same. We did not halt in the front room, but moved briskly right through it, and into the outdoors. Olida demurred, but we paid no attention to her complaints, and she came along after us.

The three of us stood among the weeds in the moonlight, and two of us, at least, thankfully inhaled drafts of the fresh mountain air. I said, "All right, Olida, let's hear your 'better idea.' It had better be pretty good. There's been murder here, and of a deputy sheriff, at that. Maybe you're planning to dope us, or curse us or something, if you've dropped the notion of doing away with us. I tell you, it won't work: Dutch Hyde is itching to do something about you Selkirks, and this looks like the chance he's been looking for. He knows we're up here."

"Why, you got no problem," she said. "At least, not if you go along with what I got in mind."

"And what's that?"

"Well, look," she said. "You're right there's going to be trouble about that deputy. It's the first mess like this we been in for a long time. What I want to do is get out, me and a few others, and leave the rest of them for good. Move away to where nobody ever heard of the Selkirks and we can start over."

"Now why should we let you go, Olida? I saw you pull the rope that killed the deputy. You're going to stand trial. You and probably a lot of the others. Conspiracy to murder, it'll be. And Tolly and I are witnesses."

"Yes, you are," she said. "That's the problem here. One way or another, I got to shut you up, even though the real guilt's on the Very Great, not me. So you either give me your word, and let me leave in peace, or I'll give you to *them.*" She made a sweeping motion with her hand, and we turned. There, spread behind us, were the Selkirks, silent white faces in the moonlight staring at us, their eyes round as owl's eyes here in the dimness. They exuded menace, it seemed to me, exhaled malice and venom. It was the most frightening sight of this frightening night, and I said, cravenly, "Yes, yes, all right. You have my word. But the sheriff gets the rest. Agreed?"

"Agreed," she said. "But you won't report anything until tomorrow. That'll give us time to get away. Then do what you want." She turned to the crowd. "It's all right. They won't tell anything. We can let them go."

The crowd parted, and Tolly and I, holding our breath, walked through the corridor they made, and back to the road. We did not talk as we trudged up the hill toward the car. At the crest we turned for a last (we fervently hoped) look at Grill's Fork.

Tolly grabbed my arm. "My God. Look!" I had already seen. Flames

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were leaping from the windows of the big house, big flames, indications of a large and furious fire. Tolly said, "We'll have to go down there," and we started down the hill at the fastest pace I was capable of. Tolly could have run faster, but he held himself to my speed.

At the point where the path met the road, there was a sudden, unnerving rattle of the undergrowth, and a figure burst out of the woods and ran toward us, waving its arms and urgently saying something that at last resolved itself into, "Charley! Tolly!"

"Dick!" I said. "For God's sake! What are you doing here? How did you get here? You were supposed to stay in town. Is that your — did you start that fire?"

"I followed you out here," he said. "My car's parked behind yours. Yes, I set that damned place on fire. We'll be rid of those monsters once and for all. Look at it burn! Go! Go! Burn! Burn, you bastards!"

He was pretty wrought up. I said, "Dick, you go on back to the cars and wait. Tolly and I have to go down there and see if we can help. Will you be all right?"

The only reply I got was, "Burn, you sons of bitches." He was still mumbling, "Burn, burn," as he passed out of sight over the crest.

Tolly and I trotted down the road and around the hillside to the burning house. The fire was violent now, and roaring; tall flames were leaping through half a dozen burned-through places in the roof. The Selkirks were standing in clusters among the weeds, standing immobile and in dead silence, the pale faces intermittently flushed with red from the flames. No one was taking action of any sort, nor was there any indication that either persons or chattels had been salvaged from the conflagration.

I thought I recognized the storekeeper in the group nearest me, and I said, Did anybody get out?"

"Nobody in there but Aunt Rhody and the changed ones. She didn't want to come out, and the rest of 'em can't. Listen to that!"

They sounded like choristers from hell, those doomed old Selkirks, trapped by their bulk and their shape, screaming as they were consumed by the flames, and (I thought) as they bubbled and fried in the awful heat. But there was one scream I did not hear: the bass bellow that I would have expected from old Ashmole. I said to the storekeeper, "The Very Great's still in there, isn't he?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "There's no way he could get out. You seen his room. In the attic of the old part of the house. Reckon he's too proud to scream. *There goes the floor!"*

The flame from the holes in the roof over the attic rooms was sucked downward for a moment, and simultaneously there was an audible thump as the enormous body dropped to the room below; then came a rending

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sound, and another thump, louder than the first, as it broke through the lower floor and dropped into the front room where the old woman had sat.

Now old Ashmole did make noises, but not screaming. He was still too proud. There was a gigantic thrashing and thumping in the room; the trapped monster was shapelessly flailing in its terminal agony. The empty, burned-out doorway and windows were intermittently occluded as the thing's heavings cast it against the walls; and once, a piece of it the size of a bathtub was extruded through the doorway and came off and lay there on the stoop, burning and bubbling and pouring out black smoke.

The other trapped creatures had fallen silent; presumably all of them were dead. The whole roof was gone now, and we heard the tearing and crashing down of the remaining floors. The walls of the wooden portion were burning swiftly. In a little while there would be nothing standing but the stone walls of the original house. And still there came from within those walls the thudding of Ashmole's maddened convulsions. Blocks of stone were knocked out of the walls and tumbled to the ground. The old monster seemed to be determined that the last part of the house to perish would be himself.

He stopped moving at last, but he still burned; from the stone shell the greasy smoke continued to billow upward and to stink. One by one, the watching Selkirks were leaving the scene, none of them, as far as I could tell, evincing any shock or sorrow or regret. I said to the storekeeper, "I haven't seen Olida," and he said, "No, they left right when the fire started. You two guys are the friends Dick Wagner sent to get him loose, ain't you?"

"That's right," I said.

"Well, let me tell you something. He's right lucky he got away from her. It don't matter my telling you now, with her gone, and you already in on a lot of our secrets. He'd of been bad off, if he'd stayed with Olida. The fact is, she's starting in on the change, and she's starting awful late. She's older than you think — a *lot* older than you think. We never had anybody change before that was so old when it happened. Aunt Rhody was the oldest one here that wasn't changed, and she was watchin' Olida careful for a long time, and just lately she told me she finally was sure. She said Olida is going to be a Very Great. She'll be the first since old Ashmole, and o' course the only one now. She's gone off someplace secret now to start her own nest. Don't reckon they'll be Selkirks, though. She'll have to take a new name. She'll have the money to do it, I reckon. Sure as thunder, she took the Very Great's chest along."

"How did she go? I mean, what are they traveling in?"

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"Oh, they took three of the cars."

"Three? How many of them went?"

"Why, all sixteen. And Olida."

Good riddance, I thought, damned good riddance. And that went for old Ashmole as well, and the rest of the denizens of that foul house. R.I.P.

I realized suddenly how tired I was. Time to go home, and past time. I looked around for Tolly, and saw him in conversation with a female Selkirk. I called, "Time to go, Tolly. Be dawn in a little while. I don't know about you, but I've got to get to bed." He looked over, called back, "Righto," said good-bye to the Selkirk, and joined me. We set off wearily up the hill, two old-timers about at the end of their strength.

"Who was that you were talking to?" I asked Tolly.

"Never did get her name. Just a Selkirk. She told me something interesting, Charley. Very interesting. About the Selkirks Olida took with her."

"The storekeeper said there were sixteen of them."

"That's right. And do you know who those sixteen are? Her children."

If he was trying to startle me, he had succeeded. *"Children?"* I said. "She has children?"

"She has indeed. And guess who the father is."

"Good God. Good God. *Dick.* Sixteen. Good God. But why — of course. He doesn't know. Tolly, don't you think that's how it is?"

"Of course he doesn't know," Tolly said. "There's not a chance. He'd have let on some way. Dick loves kids. He'd never ignore children of his own, even out of Olida."

"I don't think we should tell him, Tolly."

"No, I suppose not. They're gone now, and I imagine Olida will be pretty clever in finding a hideout. He'd never have a chance to see the kids.

"That's not the reason, Tolly," I said. "The reason is what Olida is, and what those children are." I told him what the storekeeper had told me. "So you see, Tolly, Olida is a monster just like old Ashmole. It just hasn't begun to show yet. Some of those children — maybe all of them — will undergo what the Selkirks call 'the change.' They'll be monsters, too. I don't think that's a good thing for Dick to know."

"All right, not a word," Tolly said. He sighed deeply. "I guess that about wraps it up, eh?"

"I guess it does, Tolly," I said. And of course it did, except for the lengthy and no doubt ticklish complications that no later than tomorrow would inevitably arise from Bevins's death. But at least I would be able to report to Aunt Felicia that I had extricated Dick from the toils of the Selkirks, and that he hoped to be forgiven and to be permitted to move back into his old bedroom.

But there was one thing that I was *not* going to tell her. I was not going

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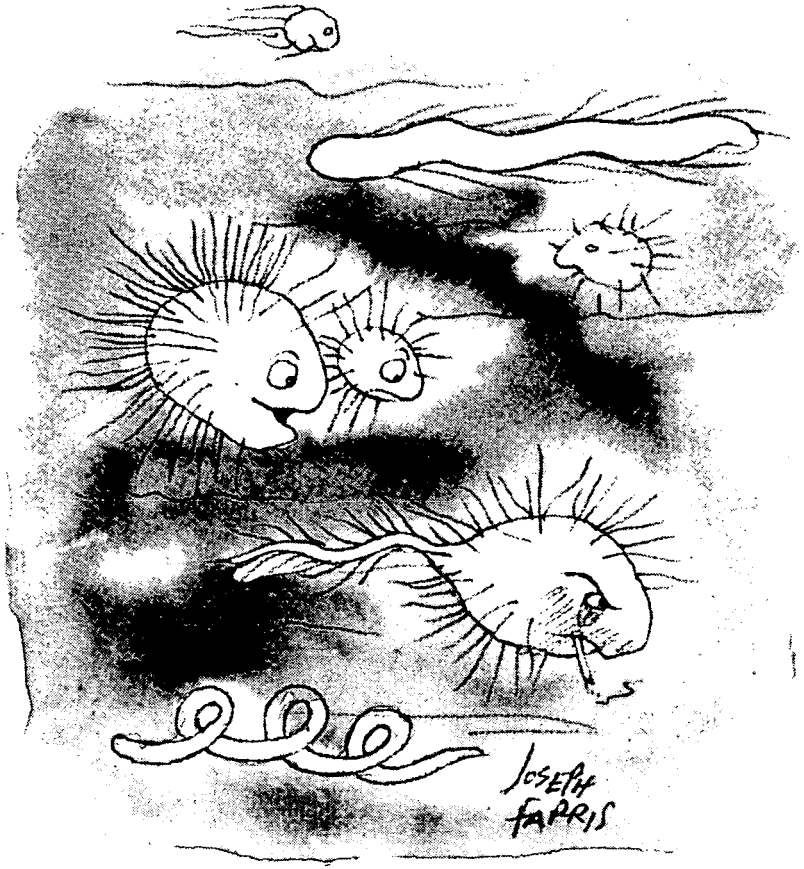
to tell her about her sixteen grandchildren. That was something she'd never know, if I had anything to say about it. It was a shock I proposed to spare her, the knowledge that her only descendants were to be speechless pale blobs living long, long lives in the airless, dark rooms of a decrepit house somewhere. That I would spare her.

And to tell the truth, I wouldn't mind being spared it myself. I would be very content to be without the knowledge that those pallid growths are my first cousins once removed.



"Well, son, we have good bacteria and we have bad bacteria. That's a bad bacteria."

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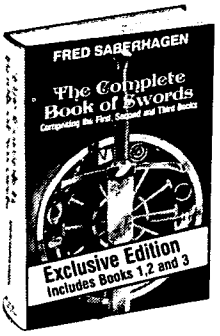

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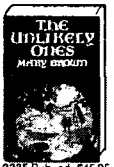

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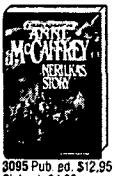

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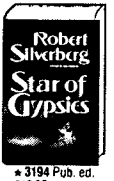

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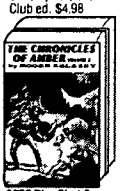

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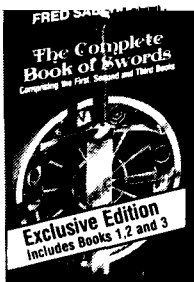

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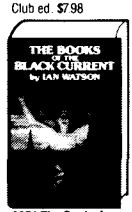

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